

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

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Born in Italy, around the border of old Austria. But when I come in Canada, you wanna know why I come in Canada? When I come in Canada, it wasn't to come for working. My father was here in 1921. He was four years in Lethbridge, all them mines in there. Then he had a sister in California, and he went there. When he was here he had lots of friends. In 1949 I decide I gonna come and visit the people that my father was here in Lethbridge. So I come over. I got to Lethbridge 8 o'clock in the morning Christmas Day. You go from family to the other. You don't want to be a cheapskate, you buy and pay. I spent all my money. I never thought to get a ticket to go home. So first thing I know I tried to go home, and I had no money. I worked one month and no break. That was a good mine. At that time the mines were still working, in 1950. But they find out I wasn't 18, so they kicked me out. So March 22nd I come on this mine. I guess they know I wasn't 18, but they give me the job. I work in 1952, '53, make money like I was saying. I have enough money to go home. But you know what happened? I meet this girl, I got married, and I decide to stay in Canada. Maybe some of you remember in 1956, if I wasn't a Canadian citizen, my wife was going to lose citizen in Canada. That's why right away I went to get my Canadian citizen paper. After that one baby come, two baby come, and I say that's it. I gonna be a Canadian and that's it. I have no regrets, I make good living. Kids, I put money for them if they want to go to school, which they never. But just the same, that money was there if they want to go to school, which can never be done if I was going back home. Of course at home I wasn't a poor guy either, we have a couple of tobacco farm. I smoked since I was this big. But I hate the tobacco farm. That's the one thing that makes me stay in Canada. Good food, good clothes, good work, and I have no regrets. No regrets at all.

Q: After you were in Lethbridge, did you come here next?

These people here, they was good friend of my father. They come down and pick me up and took me up here, and I stay with them. I was one of the lucky guys in the world. I

stay with them, and they even buy the clothes. I used to get mad, socks and stuff like this. I said, look, I work, I want to pay that. Oh no. The old man was really friend with my father. He make sure that I have \$1000 in the bank. Every payday he give me \$10, the rest he put in the bank. It cost me nothing for board and room. Soon I had \$1000 in the bank and he said, now kid, you look after yourself. Well there you go, who can be luckier than that? That's 1952; I married in '53. Of course then you had a few dollars to buy a house. But the mine started going slack, people work about two or three day a week. But again, I was one of the luck ones, I work seven day a week. I gotta say thanks to the English people, cuz they got me under their arm. They teach me how to work in safety and produce the proper way, without killing yourself, work in them how you were supposed to work. Since then I never had no regret to do the way I was taught.

Q: Did you ever get injured in the mine?

No, that's what I say before when we meet. I got off the bus, 1976 or '77, walk of from the bus from working, step on a piece of ice, I broke a leg. That's the only injury I have. If you're taught the proper way for safety, which I believe in that, first is safety, then the work. But safety first. In my time, I had a crew all the time, men working under me, and nobody got hurt. Nobody. That's because I follow the way I was taught. But then again, different companies, different bosses got in. The government got slack. Instead of pay somebody to go make sure the work is safe, they slack it for long time. They just started to get smart around the '80s. Even now, I got some of them boys that are working on the mine that strip, they say, oh boy, it's safety first. It took all that time to smarten up, because it was lots of mine that miners got hurt, stupidity. They got killed stupidity. If you talk to a person and they say, I'll go there, not all the people is the same. All the people sometimes thinking a little bit different. If you pat him on his head, you do that, and make sure you do it. Not today, tomorrow and the next day, and you'll be all right.

Q: But there were lots of people who did lose their lives in mines.

Not too many, but quite a few, especially in BC. When I went from here I went there. That was stupidity. I don't think there was one that lost his life because the danger. They just make their own danger. I know, because usually they used to come and, hey c'mon. I go from one place to another. I made this way. When something like this happen, there's nothing to it, I can go there and cut your leg off and fix them up. Then after it was finished I puke my guts out, I shit for a week. But right there and then, that's why they used to get me, I'm cool like a cucumber. After... Like I was telling Wendy, I was ready to quit in the mine in BC. I said, that's a little bit too stupidity. Then I got in and started with the safety. Get some safety committee, get some person going around. They say, I'm from the government, I like to see are you training your crew, are you training your men. Then they gotta smarten up, otherwise they put a strike on it, and they can stop production just like that. Then after that it started getting better. It was a gentleman mine.

Q: Can you describe what makes for a good mine?

I usually say, I work like a 7 mine. But in here, if you take the wrapper off your candy and you drop it, and I'm the boss and you drop it, this time you get hell, next time you're fired. This mine here, me and you working on them places there. Each one you got a place, me and you work together. Every Friday is up to me and you to bring all that junk right down to the entry. You pile them up in there. Saturday morning the crew go in and pick all that junk up. Pieces of wood, paper, anything, it's cleaned right out and take them outside, every week. There'd be no water when you walk in. If you notice when you went inside, like I say, if you restore the mine, it'll be all the same, and what do you see on the tour? The water on the side. See the spring on the side? The mine was all the same. The water all going through the low side and out to the bottom. So when you walked in it would be dry all the time. Clean, no paper or wood. Of course there was the track, and of course there was coal instead of gravel, but picture it all exactly the same, in my time. That's from 1950 to when it closed. Before that it must be the same.

Q: What can be done to prevent explosions?

Like I was saying, when we was there in the rock dust, first thing is rock dust. You spray them thick. But on this mine here, they even have the old guy. You get an old guy ready to retire, with a little coal shovel, they spray them all over the place. Plus, say you have the entry come in like this, then you got 7, they used t put trap. When you go inside they make a platform like this, well they trip, maybe 5 or 6 ton of rock dust on top. So in case the explosion be past, it collapse and smash and stop the explosion. But to work, to stop on explosion so you don't get disaster like this, best thing is the air. When you go in there, me and you and you and you, you should never go back on the same place. That air should be go and return air. That's the main thing. That's when a safety guy say, hey, you don't put the air that he use to this place. Then you stop everything. If he got 1% he come to you place, maybe 2% and so on. Next thing you know you've got 15, then boom, you blow. That's when you should be in return air should be nothing, and it should be by themselves. That's proper way to mine.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the union?

In here it was alright, at Bellevue Mine here. I don't remember, well they had a strike before I come. But when I was working here, if you ever had a problem, you used to go and say, usually they have a problem because of contract mining on a measurement. You go inside, you can measure. Me and you say, we have an extra block, that'll be another 5000 done. Then the union gotta step in. But in here the union was good. They protect the miner and everything. But I don't want to talk about other union, because I hate the guts out of them. You can put that on too. But still you have to have a union. Like here it was good. You happen to have a little place and it was wet, so the company would say, oh just a little bit wet. A union in coalmine, every month you have a pit committee. They pick you, you, you. This month you go inside and check. Next month you, you and you check. To make sure, not same guy all the time. If you go there and say, that's wet, that's touching past the sole, so it's 2 bits an hour more. In fact it wasn't 2 bits an hour, it was 2 bits a day at that time, 1950.

Q: Was there gas in the mine?

There's gas all the time. When you mining, sometime you hit the bucket and you really pushing out. But you control them. You got the lamp, especially after the '80s, you got all kind of gauges to check it. The thing is, to have somebody to make sure they use it, the safety people, guy that come. Just like I was talking about preserving the coal, look how long it took before they turn around and say, you, look after that. If that happen, you make sure you can put your water or any other thing to preserve that. If you keep going the same as the Crowsnest Pass here, eventually you gonna run out the stupid thing. It's like a glass of beer. You keep drinking and drinking, and pretty soon you find the bottom. If you run into somebody, the poor buggers, you got nothing there, maybe a drop. That's what you gotta run after, the next generation. Not the next one or the other one. Maybe 300 year down the road. The water, for example, Bellevue Mine water, that's pure water. We got them in there, safety man should know water is there, just in case. That's the way I look at it. But you have to have somebody in charge.

Q: They found there was a lot of black lung?

Right, 80% or more. When I come here I was thinking about that. I never got that. But the miner, 62, 63, 64, they was dying. They never make it to 70 year old, 80% or 90% die over that black lung. You see them cough, they was getting old before their time. As long they was 45 and 50, they could still chew that block dust. But after when you get a little bit older, a little less air, the lungs can only take so much. Plus all the miners chew and smoke. That's another thing. I smoked all my life. I used to go in the bar, and all them kids that used to go to university, they asked me, it's not the guy that smoke that hurt, it's the guy that's next to you that you kill. Did you know that? If you stop and think, I go like this, and you're there and know nothing about it, that's the one. And this was the same thing. The coal dust was the same as the cigarette smoke. So the whole time I chewed tobacco. They used to chew that Irish Rooster. Man oh man, it make you a highball, you go like this. I try once or twice. They call it the Irish Rooster. That snuff, I have nothing to do with it. But that's what it was. But you see, again, if they only know at that time, somebody to do something about it, to protect them, to get more air in there or whatever.

Q: You were saying that, with increased mechanization, the dust got worse.

Yes. But don't forget, when you got the machine outside there, the dust is course and you digest most of it. But if you run that machine there, you got 15 or 16 spray, you turn this and got a spray in there. Then you got a little fan behind with a 24 inch tube blowing this way all the time. So when you cutting, there's no dust, the dust is behind. It's not where you working place, it's behind that you gotta watch. Say a continuous miner there, a continuous miner go about 300 feet. Where do you work on the face, just like here, exactly the same, you don't even get dirty. But a guy will go with a shuttle car back and forth, he making dust. That's where it's at you gotta watch. That's where you have to put rock dust or water. But water, you gotta watch that too. If you put water on an old place and it's sitting there, you get that blacked in. The gas in the air, and you go inside to take a crap, because there was no toilet, and you squat down, that's where you stay. That's

another thing that if you was to keep the safety, the boss no road, keep out, when you hitting places like that. It's three different kind of gases.

Q: You were telling us about something called the Welsh notch?

The Welsh notch? Now somebody, you get somebody when I come here. They used to put timber like this, like you see in the picture, timber like this and like that. If you put pressure, it snapping here. There's no way it can hold. But if you put the Welshman notch like this, there's no way. It sink right in. Before the roof collapse, I guarantee you it gonna take at least a week. You got time to put one here and one here. He's the safety man, and he walk inside. I'm the boss, I go inside, to hell with it, I'm going to produce coal. But he's the safety. That's why the mine... he go inside, oh oh. He see that? I gonna come back next week, I gonna check it. Come back next week, it's really down like this, and he still never done nothing. That's when it should hit the company and say, look buster, that's the way you do it. Then you are working not only the mine, the bush, any working place is the same thing. To make sure it be done now, not tomorrow.

Q: So how does the Welsh notch help?

When I was pointing there, it's like this. The set when you went inside is like that. I have no room to put them the proper way. The proper way, on 10 feet leg, there should be a foot like this. Then if you look the Welshman notch is up here where you got that collar. You have to have a pencil to go through in between the collar and the set. So now you've got weight on it. No matter which way you go, if the weight goes this way or that way, that thing don't move. That squash right in there like that. But if you don't put them right, it's like this or it split. But proper way like this, instead of coming down to your nugget in one week, if put the Welshman notch up there, it gonna take maybe a month before it come down. Because you gotta squash all the wood there before it can break this one here. Believe me, I see it.

Q: What year did you start in the mine?

1950. Plus I have two year back home.

Q: Were miners always paid by the ton?

On this mine, ya. On Bellevue mine here, when you mining, they used to get paid to put the timber up. A center post was one penny, a set was 29 cents. A 32" x 6', that was a penny. They was getting paid that and the coal. The only thing you had to pay if you was working there, was nail and dynamite. The rest they paid. If you make a cut, a cut is 6' x 8' x 12', you get 12, 13 ton. The last wages we got on this mine here, the miner was getting \$13.15 a day. If you make cut like this, you'll make \$25 to \$26. But on this mine here, now you got a picture. Coal was come out on car. You got 65, 75 miner. I gotta give you five car, I gotta give you five car. If I can get all the car I want, there'll be no bank to keep the money up. I see miner take the cut out in 45 minute. Then they only have 5 or 6 car. Then he have to sit there and pick his nose. But they still was making good money.

But that was the top wages, \$13.15. That's the miner rate. Then the other packer was \$11, and \$12.76 the driver, \$10.07 the track layer. The top wages was \$13.15.

Q: How many tons could a miner get in an 8-hour day?

They was going like this, 250 men average. Average a miner gotta take at least 4 ton for himself and 4 ton for the rest. So you gotta have 8 ton a day per miner to keep even so you can pay you the driver, you the packer... This was till 1960. After that you could take a million ton out, and you'd still get \$100 an day or whatever they pay.

Q: What were the various areas to work in the mine?

When you first start outside, they say you go on #one raise, I just say that. There's 186 raises. You drive the rigs. So you go up from the bottom. You drive the raise up. When you're up 55 feet, then you start a crosscut. Then you put 2 men in there to pick through the outer raise like this. Remember fresh air, dirty air, fresh air, dirty air, and that's how you drive. But when they really make the money, is when you retreat. You let it squeeze a little bit. Most of the time, well on the #1 there just for example, everybody think when you mine the roof come down. The roof never come down. Well it come down of course if you broke a beam or something like that. But it's the floor coming up. All the time the floor come up. The word going around, you go in a mine, it come up. In 70 year when I clean the mine here, if you look at the plank on the side by the fence there, the floor come up 6 inches. But now it's a trick of mining. Remember, maybe you here, they say, oh they lost the mine. That's the bosses hungry, pushing. There's a pillar line, like you see on the picture over there. That's wrong. See the top where you see that pillar should be on the bottom like this. If you got any weight, instead of going that way, it would be down here. That's why they call them pillar line. But you want big production here, ... Next thing you know it's too far over this way. The weight, instead of going down here, they go in there, and that's finished. That's when they come out to preserve. The rest of the mine is finished.

There's another way to preserve. A mine inspector or supervisor or safety man to look after so it's no waste. You go there and say, look buster, you could see it. Why you doing that? You do the proper way or I close the mine. All the coal on the bottom, the way you doing, is finished. You take Coleman Colliery, that's one mine. BC, they last about a billion ago to doing that. Because it don't work that way. The way the world going around, movement all the time. Otherwise, if there's no movement, even on a coalmine or any mine, they don't stay up. Nothing stay up. The timber fall down. Just like anything else, there'd be no gravity. You go inside there now, you never hear nothing today. But say if there was a working mine, and about 12 o'clock at night you go inside inspection. You'll hear bang, bang,... Every time you get the ocean tide, the mine do the same thing -- crack, bang and snort every 24 hour. That's when they tell the kids, it's the god man walking around inside the mine. But that's when the tide come in, and the mine is the same thing. It cracks, but you get used to it after a while. But that's what it is like.

Q: What was the cause of the Hillcrest disaster?

There was that disaster on top there. It went whoof, and it knocked the ventilation out. All those 31 men, they died from suffocation. They never died from the bang. If you have, for example, self-rescue, they all walk out.

Q: Tell us about self-rescue.

That come 1962. You see the plastic one in there? That come out first, but it was taking too long to open them up. Then these one came out. You carry them in there. If anything happened, like you get a spark, well when you're working you can't have the rock dust right behind you. You got the air, but you make a little spark. There's little pockets and you get a flash. You get a flash of fire, fire takes the oxygen out, you can't breath. If you're a good man, you make them guys before they go in the mine practice so they can use them the proper way. The top come off and they just go like this, 2 seconds you got it in the mouth and you can walk right out. It's not oxygen, it's just all chemical inside. But you can breath, there's no gases or nothing inside. If you ever gonna to use them, after 16 minutes they start burning your lip. That's when you gotta train the person on the mine before they go in, before they can use them. Because they start burning and you want to go like this. But you can breath, I know. I went for 30 minutes. But like I say, it's hot. That's how you need the training. Usually a person going between 25, 26 minutes. I made 30 minutes quite a few times, just for the fun of it.

Q: So it's a flask with emergency chemicals that you can breath?

Right, to go to fresh air. If you stop and think, the Hillcrest disaster, Cadomin, when they have an explosion, half of them people never even die. The more we go, the more better the mining. Coal mining nowadays, I don't care what anybody say, it's not as dangerous as you'd think. But it was. Even when I was here it was. It wasn't quite right, because you no have the facility. Plus you no have somebody to push it. I say it again, I always say that. You have to have somebody that say, look, you do that way or it closes. The government or whoever should be behind that person full speed. Then you get something. Production, I was telling Wendy the other day, when I was, before I say that's enough and come down here and restore the mine, they went through my record of CNI in BC. The guy was there, Red Thompson, I said, you think you can find what went through when I was working for the CNI? Of all the thing that I took the kids out and the crew out, stop fight, I still was the top productur. I still got top production. Even though I walk out, I took the crew out, I took them all. Then I went back. I say, when you let me fix it, then I take the crew back. If they want you, they take you back. I went back, I fixed it.

Q: Did you ever work on a crew where a worker got killed?

No. My crew was the same crew all the time. They just put one at a time. I had one at a time. If he wasn't doing what I taught he supposed to do it, he only last not very long, he's gone, I don't want him here. That's the way the company used to put them in there, one at a time, never change all of the crew. I had the same crew all the time. So if you come

there, you gotta start from the bottom to the top. When you go on top, then you go and maybe get another machine. They liked me I guess, I don't know.

Q: What's your opinion on open pit mining?

Open pit is okay, there's lots of coal. And that's danger too. They pushing them like crazy too. That's stupidity. One year I work on reclamation. They used to like me there anyway. I was supposed to go with the chopper once a week. I never go. They give me a 4x4 and you go up. You got all kind engineering. You take the rock out of here and dump them here, then you got the coal. And you keep pushing them down like this. That's fine, as long as you're pushing them down like this and keep them going. But after you put 2 million ton of rock in there, the proper way is to cut the bottom off, then put it over the top. But they never did. A few guys there got killed. Because they keep pushing, and pretty soon you got all the weight up here. Not down there, up here. They got a guy there 2 weeks ago. That's another thing. Whoever's in charge for safety, he should see that. You can only put so much like this. The bottom gotta be solid. You get on top a million ton of stuff on top, all of a sudden it tips, and you're gone. The thing is, if you look at it, I just finish said, you still, if you do the proper way, you still producing. You still keep up your production. Instead of taking 2 week to fix that place there, it only take you one day. You get me? If it's here, it be fixed. You the boss you come. He say, no, keep going, keep going. It only take me maybe one day to fix this, but I keep going and going. Pretty soon this started and that started and that started. It's going to take me a week to fix this. The production is stuck for a week. If you look on book, I used to write ?? just for the fun of it. You'd be surprised what I come out with it. If you put 4 day in production and a week in here, you lost about 600 ton of coal. Simple as that.

Q: How does the mechanism work that detects the gas and shuts the power off?

That machine there, that come out in the '70s. It's all machine now, you gotta have them. That's why I can't see that thing happening there. It's connect to the wire, to the box. See that machine there, on one side it's just like a computer. It's all chips, and this side is the power. You put the power in there. You set them up a mark in there, but usually you set them up 2%. When it's set up like this, you go, you get a whiff of gas hit that sniffer there, and the power shut. I tell you one thing, that power never come on to when you clear that machine. I know, because I did it. You have to open the top, and you don't use air either. You use ... because I caught a lot of time, that's another safety. You catch the miner, sometime they wanna work, and he up on the raise, and they need air. And they got a little bit of gas, you can smell it or you can taste, well you can't taste it anyway, but you can feel it. They take them off of the air pack, and they blow their air. That's a no-no. That's just like throwing a match in there. The fraction of the air come out of the hose is fire. That's what you gotta watch. Like this mine here, I caught quite a few times, a few of the old miners.

They all got a button. See on them boxes there? One of these days we gonna set them up. That's why I take the chewing gum when I talk to some of the school kids. You put the chewing gum, the button stay there. If the button stay there, it's still 2 percent to when the

cow come home. Then after when it's finished, you go there and take them off and bugger off home. But I think one of them times they took them off, it was too late. On ?, on that TV they show the air going the wrong way. There was no rock dust, there was acetylene torches inside. They had tractor go inside without the scrubber. That's a no-no, that's completely no. There must be a hell mine inspector there or something. That's the guy that should be hung. And I'd be help in pulling the rope.

Q: Thank you very much for the interview. This is the kind of information people need to know.

If that's the case, I thank you. I be pounding like this. You see that rock over there, for example? Six years ago, and I even had Wendy phone the department of highway, that's dangerous, you gonna come down. Six years ago. Two weeks ago they come and knock them down. But in 6 years you can have 5 or 6 people dead when that thing come down. If you guy can do to get somebody in charge to do thing like this, good luck. I'll give you the best luck in the world.

Q: Thank you very much.

[END]