

Bob Price & Diane Peterson

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BP: I'm Bob Price. I'm chairman of the Crowsnest Pass Ecomuseum Trust, which looks after the Bellevue mine underground tour.

Q: And you?

DP: Diane Peterson. I'm the Executive Director for the Bellevue underground mine and I work for Bob and the ecomuseum trust.

Q: How is it that you came to be connected to this mine?

BP: I'm a lifelong resident of the Crowsnest Pass. Other than a couple of years away teaching for the County of Lethbridge, I've always sought my way back here. My story, my family's background happened here a long time ago. My father's family came from Wales in the early 1920s. I understand that the coalmining industry in Wales in the Rhondda Valley near Abertillery and in the county of Monmouthshire there, things weren't going good. So my father and his family and three of his brothers came to the Crowsnest Pass, emigrated to Canada and found work here in the Crowsnest Pass mines. My grandfather was a blacksmith here in the Bellevue mine and my uncle Roy, his brother worked in the coal cleaning plant or the tibble here. On my mother's side, my grandfather emigrated from Czechoslovakia in the 1930s and started working from Slovakia and eventually got a job at the Hillcrest Mountain mine, which is just about half a mile from here, the second mine in Bellevue. He was a driver boss for horse teams underground on the haulage, hauling the coal out of the mine. Then myself, I graduated from high school, got a university degree and worked in the mines for summers. In between years of university I worked for a couple years underground and then went teaching for a few years. I had enough of that and came back to the Crowsnest Pass with

my wife and our young family, and I started to work in the coalmines on the B.C. side of the border.

Q: How did you come to be here?

DP: I moved here from Lethbridge in 1990 with my family, my husband and our three children. I didn't actually come to the mine until I started at the Frank Slide Interpretive Center in 1999. In those years the Frank slide was helping out with the Bellevue mine so I had the good fortune to work down here then. I worked with a gentleman that lot of you know, Roy Lazerato. He kind of gave me the love of mining and so I feel very privileged to be here. I worked at the Frank slide for seven years and I came here in 2005 as an interpreter. The next year, the end of that year the executive director was leaving to move away and I applied for the job and I was the lucky candidate. I've been here ever since.

Q: What's the history of this mine?

BP: The Bellevue mine was owned and operated by West Canadian Collieries, which was a French mining concern out of Lille, France. They owned three mines in the Crowsnest Pass. They owned West Canadian Greenhill Mine in Blairmore, they owned the Lille Mine up at Lille, and this was their third venture. It opened in 1903 and finished up in 1961. I think it was 13 million tons of coal were mined in here over that period of time.

Q: What sort of coal and who was buying it?

BP: It was known as domestic coal or steam coal, not that good for coking of steel mills but good for heating and producing steam. The chief customer was the Canadian Pacific Railway because they were operating steam engines at that time on the railway, plus all the miners' homes in Bellevue were heated by coal too, which the miners purchased from the company.

Q: How many mines are in the Pass?

DP: There were actually 14 mines in the Crowsnest Pass at that period of time. Frank Slide, for example, was a Canadian and American coal and coke company. They opened in 1903 as well. They were open earlier in the year and their disaster was on April 29th, 1903. This mine opened in December so they didn't conflict with each other. But the last mine to close in the Crowsnest Pass was Coleman Collieries in the '80s, 1982 I believe. It was the last mine to close.

Q: You mentioned that your grandfather came from Slovakia?

BP: Yes. My father's side was from Wales and my mother's side was from Slovakia.

Q: Talk about some of the ethnic groups that came out here.

BP: A lot of the management in the mines in the Crowsnest Pass, they hired a lot of English trained management, pit bosses and fire bosses. It seemed that a lot of the other nationalities – the Slavs, the Polish people, the Czechs and the Finns and German people – they did all the heavy mining and the actual mining work, and were supervised by the English.

Q: What were their conditions of life like?

BP: Well a lot of the houses in Bellevue were cottages built by the miners as close as possible to the mine so that they could just walk to work in the morning. They were very modest, simple homes with the basic necessities, one or two bedrooms or whatever. Nothing fancy. The coal companies always had some pretty nice houses for their management in Bellevue and also in Blairmore as well, and also apartments for the supervisors. The mine also offered some single men's cottages up here in Bellevue that men could rent for a very modest rental fee per month. That's about it.

Q: Do you want to add anything to that?

DP: No, not really. The only thing I was thinking about is they had different districts, didn't they Bob? What was Bushtown? Who primarily lived in Bushtown?

BP: Just mining class.

DP: I thought somebody said a lot of the nationalities would sort of group together. No?

BP: Oh ya.

DP: That was my understanding too, is that if you could you'd want to live close to somebody that spoke your language, if that was possible. But it wasn't always possible and you didn't even work in the mine always with somebody who spoke your language. It would just depend on who you were teamed up with. But I think they did. And socials were big here, weren't they Bob? Music and socials, the Crowsnest Pass is very musical. They love their Saturday evenings.

BP: Every nationality had its own society in the Crowsnest Pass here, like the Slovak Society and the Italian Society. They all had their benevolent societies so that if a miner was killed or maimed underground and couldn't work anymore his family was taken care of by the men, by the benevolent societies.

Q: What do you know about the politics of the area back then?

BP: I actually, when I was growing up here I actually knew some of the people that were involved in the Communist movement here in the Crowsnest Pass. From what I understand, the economic conditions were so bad here and the mines were barely working, and there wasn't much for unemployment insurance and welfare in those days. So a lot of families were enduring terrible hardships. Those economic conditions actually forced the workers here in the Crowsnest Pass to band together and join a movement that

promised to help them. You had people like Tim Buck from the Communist Party of Canada speaking at the gazebo in Blairmore and here in Bellevue trying to rally the miners into joining very right winged, or they would be left wing, unions.

Q: I know that a few left wing people from this area were elected to parliament from labour.

BP: Ya, NDP. We had the only NDP member of the legislature in Alberta; that was Turcott from Pincher Creek.

Q: Were you old enough in those days to remember when he was elected?

BP: Yep.

Q: What was the mood around that period?

BP: I think it was basically once again, the miners were experiencing hardships, and they promised the most for the Crowsnest Pass.

Q: I understand there was a lot of activity at the municipal level as well – was it Blairmore?

BP: Ya, they had a Communist council.

Q: Is there a Tim Buck Park?

DP: We have Tim Buck Avenue.

BP: The main street of Blairmore was divided by potted plants on big stands. One side of the street was Tim Buck Boulevard and the other side of the street was Dominion Avenue. It was kind of hilarious time. The town council was Communist and they did

everything to pick on the management at West Canadian Collieries in Blairmore. For example, every coalminer in Blairmore probably had a mongrel dog, but all the mine managers had the purebred dogs so they tripled or quadrupled the dog tax on purebred dogs in Blairmore just to pick on them. They did a lot to help the workers, too, like the council. Any lots in Blairmore that were vacant, they would allow the miners' families to use those town lots and grow gardens in there to augment their food supplies and things like that. They were actually a good council for the workers, but they had a terrible reputation nationally because Canada was not in favor of Communism.

Q: What year would that have been?

BP: That would be in the early '30s.

Q: How did mining evolve?

BP: When the Bellevue mine first opened up it was all, sorry. When these mines first opened up in the Crowsnest Pass it was a very manually oriented type of labour. The mining was done with hand picks and shovels. Because the seams of coal were on a pitch, they used gravity – they mined uphill and the coal slid down sheet iron chutes by gravity down to the main entry down below where the coal cars would be filled up and the air driven locomotives would take the coal out of the mine to be cleaned at the tippie.

DP: Can you tell about when you were a bucker, well first when you did the rock testing and then the bucker?

BP: The first job I ever had underground was in Coleman Collieries. It was a conventional mine just like this. The miners would be mining up above and sometimes the coal would get stuck in the chutes and it wouldn't come down to the loading area. So our job was, we worked in pairs, the two of us. One went up one chute and one went up the next chute and we'd go up to where the coal was stuck. We always had a big stick with us and we'd hang onto a timber and pick away at the bottom of this coal where it

was stuck in the chute and try to get it moving. Sometimes it was four feet high of coal. Lots of times, if you couldn't get it going, especially if it was there all weekend, the chute would get rusty and you'd have to get right in the chute with your body and sit on your rear end and buck like you're on a bucking bronco and use your rear end and your feet to get this coal moving. Sometimes when it got moving fast you had to just about bail out of that chute before it took you right down to the bottom. There's been quite a few miners in the Crowsnest Pass killed before they could get out of the chute, as coal buckers.

Q: What was the length of the chute?

BP: Sometimes the miners would be up 2,000 feet up the chute from the main tunnel. You'd have to keep walking along until you spotted where the blockage was. One time I was going up there to where the blockage was. The two coalminers up above, I guess they must not have thought I was coming, cuz they got impatient and they came down to the blockage and got their own coal going. I was going up and the coal came rumbling down the chutes. I was off to the side in the man way but the dust got so thick in there I couldn't even see my hand in my lamp. There was so much of this black dust swirling around I could not see, and I was choking. Finally it cleared up and I was coming back down and I met the pit boss coming in and said to him, Jack, is there any way I could have a dust mask? He looked at me and said, what are you kid, some kinda pansy? So this went on for about a week, he was teasing me. Finally he came in the mine one day and handed me this green mask that was made out of foam like a sponge type material. He said, here, he says, use this and you'll have to take it into the shower with you every night and wash it out because it's gotta last you a week. He says, I'll give you a new one every week. When I left the mines there was any kind of safety supplies you wanted, they were there – dust masks laying everywhere, just a drastic change.

Q: What brought about that change?

BP: From what I understand, the coalmining companies in the Crowsnest Pass were extremely hardnosed and they treated the men like dirt. You had to work continually for

your shift. The horses were treated better, from what I understand. If you didn't like it you could leave, and that was their attitude. But later on when I worked underground the men were scarce, hard to find underground coalminers, and they treated you better. You got all the safety supplies you needed, and safety was an important issue.

Q: Did the union have any influence in that regard?

BP: Oh ya. I was on a couple of wobbles, work stoppages. One time in the middle of winter we were working in B level in Coleman Collieries and a huge storm came through. The roadway went to the top of a mountain and then dropped in behind to get into the mine. They plowed it with cats and there was about 25 foot high snow banks on the side of the road. The men were really concerned. If there was an avalanche came down there the bus would just get knocked right off the road. So ya, we wobbled. The company actually had to bring some avalanche people in from Calgary and shoot that big bank of snow down before we would go back in there. So ya, the union protected you in a lot of ways.

Q: Which union was it?

BP: That was United Mine Workers of America, UMWA.

Q: Were you around when some of the other rival unions were coming in?

BP: No, the UMW was pretty well established here and there was no raiding going on.

Q: Was there good health and safety language in the collective agreement?

BP: Oh ya.

Q: Were there lots of incidents of respiratory diseases?

BP: A lot of the old miners developed silicosis of the lungs, mainly from working with drilling in rock without water to keep that rock dust down. There was some black lung, or I think it was called pneumoconiosis in those days. But the coal in the Crowsnest Pass is a softer bituminous coal. It would get in your lungs, sure as heck you'd have coal in your lungs, but at the end of the day you were able to cough it up. The area around Canmore west of Calgary had semi anthracite coal there, extremely hard coal, and the particles in the air were like little needles. It was a very brittle coal and it would stick in your lungs, and there were way more incidences of black lung in that area.

Q: But you saw retired miners with respiratory problems?

BP: Oh I heard a lot of them, their lungs were terrible. I heard them, the way they coughed.

DP: I was going to mention too when we were chatting in the mine, about the camaraderie of the men and what good friends you were and how you really needed, that was your brother. You might not like each other Saturday night but Monday morning that was your new best friend. On our way in today the gentlemen were commenting about stories that they'd heard about men in the washhouse. One of the things that I heard about in the washhouse was that the men would line up so that you could wash the back of the man in front of you. Is that true?

BP: That's true. You were so dirty when you came in, you sort of looked like that lady on the pancake package, pretty dirty. You would actually wash the guy's back next to you and he would do yours, and so on. That's the only way you could get clean. Up in the strip mines that I worked in at the end there, if you asked the guy if he wanted his back washed he would think there's something wrong with you. It wasn't that way in the underground washhouse.

Q: What was it that actually attracted people to working in the mines?

BP: The men, like you said, it's such a dingy place to work. Myself, my experience was that the guys I worked with made the job. We'd all work as a team and we'd all work hard and we'd get the job done. We felt good about that and we stuck together and watched out for each other underground. We drank beer on Saturday in the Greenhill Hotel and mined more coal on that Saturday afternoon and got mined all week. But there was a closeness amongst the men. There's a challenge to coalmining and you never really thought about the danger. If you were always thinking about the danger you wouldn't get the job done, so you'd try to put that stuff behind you.

Q: But was there danger?

BP: Oh yes.

Q: What did you experience or hear about in your years?

BP: Well there's always the chance of roof fall, rock falling off the roof. If there's six or seven or eight inches of rock and then a little band of coal above that rock, which is like rider coal, it's called, the weight of that coal seam in there, that tiny coal seam is weak and the rock will fall down. So we would run roof bolts into the roof through that stuff to keep it up or put timber sets there.

Q: Did you experience some disasters?

BP: There's a couple times, like we were, when we were putting up arches, steel arches in this sublevel in Michel underground and they were supposed to go up every five feet. The rule was that when you finished cutting out five feet of coal you always backed the machine out so there was never loose coal hanging above you. You'd put the top of the arch, called the crown, on the head of that continuous miner over there and then it would lift up to the roof. But our operator for some reason never backed the miner up far enough. We were bringing the collar in there to get hoisted up and the roof, all the coal, you're holding 100 feet of coal up above you in the hydraulic mine. I don't know how

many tons came down but it pretty well buried us. The one fellow that was closest to the head of the miner, it knocked his head down and he had about 20 stitches under his chin, so we had to take him out.

Q: Were there deaths during your time?

BP: Yes, on cross shifts. It seemed like in underground mining there's so many x number of deaths per 100,000 tons of coal mined. It just seems like there were accidents that happened. They were not always happening but they were inevitable, if you can understand that.

Q: It must have been a hard life for the women and families.

DP: A little while ago you had an interview with a young lady named Lizzy Liska. I remember sitting listening to the interview and she said she lived in Bellevue and her husband came from Coleman. She said, I wish he'd never come for me. She said, it was the hardest life I ever had, I could ever have imagined. All I did my whole life was be his wife and worry every day. She would tell about what it would be like to hear the mine whistle blow. As soon as the whistle blew she would talk about how all the women would run out on the street and ask each other, do you know who it is, do you know who it is? They knew if your father was in there and your husband and your son, whose family was going to be going down today? They had no way of knowing because the women were never allowed underground. So it was a really hard life for the women. The money wasn't certain. Not in Bob's day but in the early days they would only bring out the coal when they had someone to buy it. So you wouldn't go to work every day, you'd only go when the whistle would blow. So they never knew for sure when the men would be able to be going into work and how much money they would be making that month. So they had a lot of gardens, didn't they Bob? And chickens and things like that, so that they would be as self sufficient as possible. Of course they'd make clothes, you'd hear the stories of how they'd make the clothes.

BP: They hunted and fished.

DP: Ya, to supplement. Remember they'd talk about the Red Rose flower sacks, making clothes out of flour sacks and things like that. Very resourceful. They didn't depend on anybody for anything. They were very resourceful and independent, very proud people. They did what they had to do, but it was a hard life. This was a life where the men and the women worked probably every minute of their waking day, I would say.

BP: Up in Coleman the central school downtown, which was the main school there, was right next to the miners hospital in Coleman. That eventually became the United Mine Workers hall, but it was the hospital. If they saw a truck coming from the mine going to the hospital then all the kids would wonder who they're bringing in to the hospital on the stretcher, who's covered up under that blanket. They knew something had gone on.

Q: It must have been tough on kids.

DP: I can only imagine. A lot of the men, some of the men wished that their sons would go to the mine but others wished their sons never would. It was a difference, I guess it would depend. I guess what I find most remarkable is the bravery and the camaraderie. Bob is being very modest but I think you never knew underground what day was going to take your life. I was talking to a gentleman the other day and he said that it was almost a religious event every day before they would go to work. They would sit down together and have half a sandwich before they'd go in the portal. They'd sit down and eat half a sandwich and talk about their wives and children, what their kids were doing in school, and things like that. He said, but we always knew when we went in the portal, you never knew which day would be your last day to have half a sandwich with that man. That's what they faced every day that they went to work. One of the underground men that Bob and I were talking to the other day said firemen and underground miners and soldiers are the only people that really know what that feels like. I thought, that is so true. Those are three occupations where the men knew. I remember interviewing a man once and he said, going underground was like signing my death warrant, because I knew either the coal

was going to get me or it was going to be so hard on my body that it may end my life early. I thought, what a way. But that's what they did. They were so brave and such honorable men, that's what they did to raise their families.

Q: Did you lose any friends or relatives?

BP: Well my mom's uncle Joe Edamik from Coleman was working at Vickery mine ten miles north of Coleman. They had a bus to transport the men home at the end of the shift. This uncle of my mom's, Joe, he somehow was late in the shower – I guess he must've been extra dirty or something. But anyways, he came out to get the bus and the bus had already left for Coleman. He's an old Slav guy in his 60s and didn't know what else to do, so he promptly decided he's gonna run that ten miles to Coleman. They found him dead on the side of the main road into Coleman a couple miles down from the mine.

Q: So there was never any major disaster in the mine?

BP: Oh yes, there was a bad one here in this mine in 1910, December 9th. They'd been having ventilation problems in the mine, they couldn't get enough fresh air in there. There was a lot of methane building up in gob areas where the coal had already been extracted, and there was not enough ventilation getting into those areas. There was a large amount of methane building up in there. They had a couple of blasts, strictly methane coal, and they were lucky that no one was killed. But on December 9th over 200 men just walked out of the mine on dayshift and evening shift; I think there was about 43 of them went in. Around 7:30 in the evening the area up in one of those gobs, I guess they figure a piece of roof rock fell off the roof and struck another piece of roof rock and sparked. It set the methane on fire and the methane exploded. The result was that 31 men lost their lives in the Bellevue mine that evening. At that time the province of Alberta did not have mine rescue stations, so the mine manager here, Mr. Powell, he telephoned Fernie and got the Crowsnest Coal Company to bring mine rescue people down from Morrissey and Coal Creek and from Hosmer and Michel. I think there was 13 of them came down here, and one of them actually perished in the mine too, bringing out one of the miners.

Q: The bodies?

BP: No, the guy was still alive. He was trying to bring out too many men, working too hard, and his rescue apparatus wouldn't filter enough fresh air for him and he collapsed on the main entry and died. His name was Fred Alderson from Hosmer.

Q: Did most kids leave when they grew up, or were the communities pretty stable?

BP: In those days there wasn't really much to attract a young person from the Crowsnest Pass into the city, other than if you wanted to go to university or become a professional person. The mines here always offered good employment. Even if your dad was lost in the mine, a lot of young men would still go to work in the mine. I think it was a pretty stable community and the men stuck to their jobs. Employment conditions were such that you couldn't go many places and find good jobs. The men at that time in the mines here were very well paid, a lot more than the average worker in Alberta.

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My formative years were here in Bellevue. Our house was in the community of Maple Leaf just at the top here. After school I'd go walk over by the mine buildings around 4 o'clock and I'd see this whole parade of men come out of this big building. They all had their lamps on and their hats and everything, and they'd disappear into this shack outside that was probably no bigger than an outhouse on the farm. I kept thinking to myself, how could all those men, 50 or so men, fit in that little shack? Here they were opening that door and as soon as they got in there was a stairway down into the mine. So it finally dawned on me what was actually happening.

DP: We tell that story every day. That's a nice story – a young man's perspective of, where did all those men go?

BP: So your memories growing up in this town are fairly pleasant?

BP: Oh ya, ya. Some of the things I can remember, I can remember every at 6 o'clock at night, every miner in the whole community would step out his door and listen for the mine whistle. One whistle would be no work, two whistles would be work the next day. You were always tuned to the mine whistle; it would tell you if the company needed you the next day or not.

Q: How steady was the work?

BP: For the war years it was very steady, then things slowed down quite a bit after the war, because of less demand. In the 1950s Canadian Pacific Railway started to use diesel engines on the track, which were much more efficient than the steam engines, and that spelt the death knell for the mines in the Crowsnest Pass.

Q: What keeps people living here now? What's the economy like?

DP: If you could eat the air, everybody would live here. It's just so beautiful, it really is a beautiful place and a wonderfully friendly community. There are many people who would like to move here and make their lives here. The main industry here still is mining. They go now over to British Columbia, to Sparwood and Elkford, to work in the mines. There's five open pit mines over there now. They still are the same honorable men as they were underground. The camaraderie is maybe a little different but still they're very good friends to each other. Now it's much better, although we are still very dependent. Whenever there's a strike threatened or it sounds like there's not going to be enough coal and some of the men will be laid off, you know that it's really going to hit the community hard. One of the things I like about the Crowsnest Pass is it's somewhat colorblind. I really love that the men don't care. Every nationality is represented here and everybody is your friend. From a person's point of view of raising my family here, one of the things I liked the most is the Crowsnest Pass, as much as some of the communities value the clothes that you're wearing or whether you're wearing a name brand pair of jeans, the Crowsnest Pass people never cared about that. They cared more about what kind of a person are you than what kind of clothes do you wear. I loved raising my family here for

that reason. My family, my children are very resilient and very kind because they grew up here, much more so than I saw other people growing up in the city. It's a back to basics point of view here. Going for an ice cream cone is an event in the Crowsnest Pass. Where a lot of children are all looking for their cell phones and Gap jeans and things like that, our kids are walking over to the ice cream store. It's really nice in that way. You may say we're a few years behind the times; we tend to believe that we've gone back to basics and what's most important.

BP: The mines on the B.C. side are all owned by the same company, Tech Corporation. The tonnage now is upwards of 27 million tons a year coming out of those mines. It's hard to believe.

Q: Who's buying it?

BP: Some of the mines are co-owned by Pohang Iron and Steel in Korea. The JSM, the Japanese Steel Mills are buying a huge amount of coal still for their coking for their steel mills. There's coal going to South America, to Inland Steel in Chicago, and it's just unbelievable.

Q: Is it all for export?

BP: All for export. I think there's still a few people around, like I know some Hutterite colonies heat their barns and everything with coal. But there's very little domestic coal sold here now – it's all going out of the valley on trains.

DP: I would just like to thank the men and recognize the men for their abilities and the things that they do, and the art and science of underground coalmining. I had the good fortune to be in with them the other day when they were putting up a set. It was absolutely amazing and I had to think to myself, who would even know how to do that anymore? Who would even have the ability or the strength or the knowledge to know which way they had to cut the timber, how they had to notch it, where you wanted it to

sit, how you had to roll it, how you're gonna make that happen? It was just honestly a work of art and it was almost like watching a ballet. I was saying to Bob, I'd love to be able to film them the next time they do that, because it's something most people would never have the good fortune to ever witness. It really is a dying art and sadly it's leaving us with the underground coalminers.

Q: What is a set?

DP: A set is what they do to take care of the roof up above. There's roof bolts that you can put into the rock, but a set has two legs and a collar. You sit the collar on the two legs and that's how you can support the roof. As you saw in our mine today, you go down the number 2 into the number 2 seam, all of our sets are at 34 degrees because that's the same angle as the coal, and you must put the timbers in at the same angle as the material you're replacing. So even to watch them to do that, to set a leg and how they have to know where the bottom as to go and where the top has to go, and how they measure with the two measuring sticks just the way they did old school.

BP: There's such a thing as the Lufkin measuring tape underground, measuring just with sticks.

DP: Tell them how you do that, Bob.

BP: Well you put enough, two sticks, you extend them until the top of the stick touches the roof and then you make allowance for a hole in the ground called a hitch, where the leg of the timber goes. They anchor it in place and put living there and do the other side the same way at the proper height and then measure across the two legs at their points with string. The timber that's gonna go across that distance of string, that's where you cut your flat notch in the timber on each side, then hoist it into place, then it's wedged in tight.

DP: These sticks are amazing. When you take the sticks then they have to take the sticks out in that same configuration and lay those down on the timber, and that's how they decide. If they put them down, don't touch them. If you touch them, you just lost their measurement and they've gotta go in and start over again. You can't cut it inside the mine, you have to bring it outside to cut it.

Q: We saw that ? up there – tell us about that.

BP: The welsh notch, that's the type of join where the collar meets the leg. As the roof becomes heavier or as the floor pushes the leg up, the joint becomes tighter. If it becomes so tight that you can't pull that pencil out of there, you know that the roof is taking on weight. It's an indicator.

Q: What are some of the other tricks that have been developed?

DP: It was amazing, actually, and I watched these gentlemen do it. One of our mine safety gentlemen, when he would go in to check, he had a couple of locations where he would put six rocks across on a little ledge, just sitting right on the edge of the ledge. Every day he would spot those six rocks. If ever any of those rocks moved, he knew there'd been a change. We have the telltales in the mine, where there's a pipe at the bottom and a pipe at the top, and a continuous cable through the rocks. If any of the rocks start to move in between where you can't see them, it's going to either tear off that cable or pull it up into the tube, and again you know there's been a change. But I see Bob go in often. When he says wedges, they'll put a wedge in behind a timber. Some of them, what do you call it, “sekera”? Why do you call it that?

BP: It's a slovac for axe, “sekera”.

DP: He'll hit the wedges in and tighten them up, but some of them are just hand tight so they'll go in and wiggle them and see, well this was loose yesterday and now I can't wiggle it today. So just very simple things such as that. It was amazing. Somebody told

me one time too, I don't know if this happened to you Bob, but sometimes the fire bosses would come in and lift up your helmet and see if you were sweaty underneath. If you weren't sweaty you weren't working hard enough.

BP: That was a trick the fire bosses would use. Nasty.

Q: They have a sense of how to use the things of nature.

DP: And it is a sense, Dave, it really is. When I was in the mine you were talking to Dave today about Ron Ruby. I was in the mine with Ron about a month ago and he looked at a piece of rock and said, that will be down within the week. I thought, no it won't, it's been up there hundreds of years; that won't be down. The next day it was down, and I don't know how he knew that. It was like a sixth sense. Going in, Bob does the same thing. When you go in the mine with Bob he doesn't look down, he looks up all the time. He's checking the roof and if he can see any cracks in the roof that weren't there before he knows it's something that needs to be addressed. That is a sixth sense, something that has developed over time. It's a gift that nobody can give you, you have to develop it on your own.

BP: It makes me wonder what's gonna happen to places like this Bellevue underground mine tour in 25 years when all of us that know how to put up a high side leg or a timber set are no longer active. What's going to happen to a place like this? It's an underground provincial historic site, and who's gonna be able to replace those timbers?

Q: Maybe they'll replace them with supports that are inorganic.

BP: Maybe, but they want authentic mining techniques.

Q: When did the Frank slide take place?

DP: 1903.

Q: Isn't it ironic that this mine opened that same year? Is there something dangerous about the structure of the rock?

BP: A lot of the coal seams in the Crowsnest Pass are, there's a lot of faulting and there's a lot of anticlines and synclines in the seams, and there's a lot of methane gas because the coal seams tend to be deep. That's the main hazard in the Crowsnest Pass. These Crowsnest Pass mines are known as the gassiest mines in Alberta. There were hundreds of miners in this valley killed because of mine explosions.

Q: When was the last great disaster in this valley?

BP: In 1914 the Hillcrest mine just across the valley here experienced in June a methane explosion, and that caused the coal dust to explode and there was 189 men killed on dayshift. That was the last big one. There was others, like McGillivray in Coleman in 1925, there was 10 killed there. This mine, over its operating period, had 67 men killed in it. It's not an accident free industry by any means.

Q: What year did this shut down?

BP: '61.

Q: How did it become a historical site?

BP: Our MLA at the time, Fred Bradley, and a group of people decided that to bring more tourism and such to the Crowsnest Pass that maybe one of the old mines should be opened up. It just so happened that the Bellevue mine was chosen for that, and there was a big government grant to fund it. Around 1990 the first thousand feet of the tunnel was reconditioned and the tour opened up.

Q: What has been the response from the public?

BP: Wonderful. Our attendance is going up, up, up.

DP: We see anywhere between 16,000 to 19,000 over the four month period. We do a lot of marketing so that perhaps we can let more people know that we're here. Generally speaking, once people have been here once, if they do a good job they'll go away and talk to other people about it. Word of mouth. Satisfaction speaks louder than words.

[END]