This is Bernard McNicholl interviewing Muriel McKay for the Coal Tyee History Project.

BM: Mrs. McKay, what year were you born?
MM: I was born in 1922.
BM: Were you born in Nanaimo?
MM: Yes I was. Right on the corner of Nicol and Farquhar where my mother had a store there.
BM: Was your father a coal miner?
MM: Yes he was.
BM: What do you remember about your father?
MM: Well my father died when I was 7, however I do remember the great man that he was. A great philanthropist really I guess that's what you would call my dad. Always having the welfare of his fellow man at heart. I think that was true really, of all the miners that I knew. Especially my uncle. And my mother was an Addison and her whole family came from Whitehaven England which was a coal mining town in Cumberland England. And they all came here and with the exception of one uncle, they had all a history in the mines. And I guess my uncle Albert Addison too was more or less related to the mines because he was in the shops and was one of the clerks there and he handled the dynamite and the properties that they needed in the mine. Really I guess a great and vivid life that we had in Nanaimo. Our folks came here in 1909 and it was very small Nanaimo that they came to. A Nanaimo that I guess was filled with struggling miners from Great Britain that were trying to work their way and make a new life for themselves.

BM: They hadn't reached a peak of prosperity.
MM: Well no, I don't think so really because ... of course there had been the big explosion. Had taken its toll.
BM: Yes, that was 1887.
MM: Yes, well and then there was another one in I think 1898, another small explosion, but my father was a digger in the mines and his helper or muckman or whatever they called 'em, he had a great relationship with old Harry Henry, one of the Indians from the reserve and he was my dad's co-worker. And Harry was a great old guy, an Indian that just loved everybody, you know. And just really a super man. Well you know, Mother's brother had various vocations in the mine. My uncle Blendel (?) Addison was a carpenter in the mines and he did a lot of the work in timbers...
and properties around the mine. My uncle Bill Addison...

BM: What exactly do you mean by properties around the mine?

MM: Well they had repairing the coal cars, and all the repairs that have to be done where there was a lot of wood used. And my uncle was actually a cabinet maker and he was gassed in the mine. And he died as a result of that, without any compensation at all. Really sad and my Aunt El nursed him in love all those long years that he suffered. And my Uncle Bill Addison was in partnership with Mr. Dendoff after a few years. He was an iron monger. And they made all the lamp standards in Nanaimo, the ornate ones. Many of them are gone now but you can see a few of them made by Addison and Dendoff.

BM: Is there one at City Hall?

MM: Yes. That was one that he had made. And Dendoff Springs down on Fry Street is still linked in with the Dendoff name who was the partner. My uncle of course is gone now and all of his family. Yes, they contributed well, I think, the Addison family and still contribute. They're a very prolific family. They raised wonderful families. My uncle Walker was in and around the mines during various things. I think he was down the mine for some time. But Uncle Walker was always the one that liked the earth and he would rather become a farmer. And my uncle Herb Addison was a coal miner and he always tells the tale about going down and looking for a job and they asked him what mine he had worked in and he said oh lots of kinds of mines and they told him that there wasn't any job so he came back out and the fellows used to sit on the fence outside the Western Fuel Company there and they asked him what they'd said and he said well he couldn't get started today, come back tomorrow. So they said, well did you tell them what mine you worked in and said oh you'd better give them a mine specifically. So when he went back the next day he told them a certain mine that he had worked in. They said, what type of lamps did they use? Oh he says, I don't know 'cause I always worked day shift. It was a real laugh. I had my uncle telling that tale at the first miners' reception that we had, in 1974, but uh. And then my mother's sister, Mrs. Stephenson's husband was associated with the mine as an assistant inspector.

BM: Oh she was the inspector?

MM: No my mother's sister's husband. I don't know, there's just some-
thing about the miners. And I think too they rallied around my
mother in her business 'cause she had the business for 34 years
on the corner of Nicol and Farquhar and they did support the
widows, and the orphans. She supported them by feeding during the

BM: Does the store still stand?

MM: Yes it is. My sister took it over after my mother gave it up.
And the store was in our family for 65 years. Mrs. Bamford was
my sister. She just passed away. (Phone rings.)
I've told this story so many times. You'd have almost thought
we were little urchins standing down at the pithead when the miners
came off from their shifts. We used to stand there and say, "Have
you got anything left in your buckets?" And really if you have
never tasted a cheese sandwich that was down the mine, you've
never tasted a cheese sandwich. It seemed to mellow of something.
Boy I can still taste it. I think if I shut my eyes and somebody
had given me a cheese sandwich that had been down the mine, I'd
recognize it. That's how vivid it was in my memory. But I wasn't
a starving child because my mother had the store and we were always
very well fed. I certainly can't say that for a lot of my play-
mates, they were hungry during the depression years.

BM: Yes, it was during the depression that you were a little girl.

MM: Yes. I'm talking back to when I was maybe 7 or 8, and that
chestnut tree is still standing there right at the corner of the
Princess Royal school yard. And Mrs. Johnston, Archie Johnston's
mother and father lived in that house right there. It's gone now,
cleared for the school yard. It had a beautiful garden. But we
used to sit there and wait for the miners to come up. We weren't
allowed to go... they didn't like.... we were maybe allowed but
they would rather not have us gone to the pithead because there
was a lot of trucks going in for coal and things there. They
used to say they led the coal from the mines. You know, a leader.
And so we used to sit under this tree and they always used to save
the kids tidbits and that gave them a lot of pleasure to be able to
reach into their buckets. And then too to watch the dear old
Chinamen coming up the hill and they walked one right after another.
They never walked side-by-side. They came up the hill, they walked
one after another then they used to bring little packets of wood
home with them and they bundled together and they'd pack those over
their shoulders on a stick and away they'd go to Chinatown. And there again we became very friendly with them because we went to school with a lot of their children. And my mother was a very wonderful person, And knowing that perhaps they didn't have the home baking in their homes, like Canadian home baking, they had their own style but mother used to bake tea cakes and she used to wrap them individually in wax paper and I would stand out at the corner of the store there and give the Chinese men a tea cake to take home.

BM: Free?
MM: Yeah, we used to give them to them free to take home.
BM: Would the Chinese often patronize your store because of this?
MM: Oh not really. No they had their own but they were always friends. And at Christmas time you know they'd bring down the lechee nuts and the ginger and the jars and oh we used to get little Chinese dolls from them. But they were kindly and were so grateful for somebody to be kind to them. Because the Chinese played a real important part, they really did in the history of Nanaimo.
BM: Sort of like, I'll give something to you today and I'll get paid back the same way sometime in my life.
MM: You're very right. Get back from the person that you give directly but it comes back 10 fold from so many other places. It's the law of return you know. If you give it with a good heart and some way then it comes back to you. A lot of people in Nanaimo have given alot but boy have they been repaid 10-fold. (More along this line doesn't add much to the story) You know we talk about miners and even though these men were not blood relatives of mine ...
BM: They were occupational relatives.
MM: Right. They were and they are to this day. And I never go downtown but what I don't meet some of them. It's always that bright smile. I don't know whether I'm sweet little Muriel but..
(More along this line)
Now as you said about your friend going down into the Cape Breton mine, I don't think they could really ever tell you how it felt to go into the depths of the earth.
BM: I once went into a salt mine in New York but it was so huge, it was as if it was a different purpose.
MM: As young as I was when my father died, I could remember him telling me about going over and working on Protection Island, and hearing
the propeller on the steamship going out on the early morning trip to Vancouver and thinking, I'm sure if it had been me I would have felt like running away home to make sure I got over. But I think that they must have had a great deal of faith. They can't tell me, will they? they had to believe because I'm certainly sure they had to believe that someone was there looking over them, caring for them.

BM: Yeah, things were so, conditions were so bad... they had to put faith in what little they had.

MM: Right and you see they didn't like mining, now where my folks came from in England in Whitehaven, my husband visited there and he went down the mine there and now it's an atomic (does she mean automatic?) mine. It's still a coal mine but it's done with the properties of all the tunnels are all cement that's been white-washed all the way down and the men come out of there as if they'd just gone to a days work in an office. It's not as hazardous, as what they came on to here. Well I'm sure if they started the mines up here now it would be on a higher level of safety. They wouldn't have allowed that now you know. But people said that the grass would grow on the streets of Nanaimo when the coal mines closed but you know this shows you that...

BM: Did it ever? I heard someone say when they first moved here in the mid-fifties that grass actually started to grow on Commercial Street. Was that true?

MM: Well I think grass will grow wherever seeds are, you know. I wouldn't say that the grass has ever grown, but I think that was sort of a thing that was said literally you know. There may have been a bit of grass growing but I'd like to think that it grew with nutrition. HA, ha, ha.

These men turned their hands to many things. Miners were not dumb men. They're very clever. And they could turn their hands to many things which they had to do just because the mines closed, that did not say that couldn't make a livelihood somewhere else.

BM: You've got to be intelligent enough to pack up and leave the country that you are in, to come here. That takes a lot of courage and intelligence enough to realize that I'm going to try to sacrifice what I have for something better.

MM: Right. And they didn't live with as many appointments as they ahve today. They didn't have all the lovely furniture although today people are buying that type of furniture,
many more dollars than it was worth. But they didn't live extravagantly. But they lived well.

BM: This is what my friend who went to that mining area said. The people lived very simply, very slow, not slow but relaxed pace not hurried they're quite contented.

MM: They made their lives around their families. Their family meant a great deal to them. But they weren't about to lock anybody else out either. People cared. The Southend community of the town were aware that people were really interested in their fellow men. They really were. They would not see anybody starve, they would never see anybody want. See they all had gardens, this was another thing. They had their vegetable gardens. It wasn't the day of freezers so they had to can. But if you had an overabundance of vegetables and one thing and another you gave them to your neighbour and you were returned if she baked something or something they were doing working together. One was helping the other. And it'll come back you know, it's coming back now.

BM: We do that you know. We've got a small garden in the back yard, sometimes we have more than we can eat. You can't sell it, why not give it away?

MM: Right. There have been a lot that would never share but that was not the miner. I think the miner was a man that was very benevolent.

BM: He probably thought he was great but not as great as the next person, that was the same. We're all human beings, what more can you ask for.

MM: One fellow couldn't do one thing, and another one could, so if he needed a tap fixed one day, someone may need some cement work done another day so it was a case really of you help me and I'll help you. That's how a lot of their homes were built too. They didn't have the money for one thing for doing that. The simple life, not simple unintelligently but simple to the way of their life style not cluttered. What they did they did well. They didn't clutter it up. Their lives weren't cluttered.

BM: The word meant something between each other, maybe not between management but you know ...

MM: It was really ... well they have a lot to do with management too. Employer-employee situations. I know we heard many, many stories as children about the management. They would wait for the whistle to blow one or two whether they'd stay home or they would go to work and the management I'm sure were cursed when they heard the
whistle but they didn't go because lots of days it wasn't safe to go down the mine. The gases were high and they weren't allowed to go into the pits and there again ... 

BM: Would say that their was a negative attitude towards management or its hard to say. I haven't really found this hard, hard murder attitude to kill management but

MM: The thing was these men were not business men. They were the labourers and they knew, they felt I'm sure that all it meant was just getting the coal out of the ground. That they didn't realize that there had to be wage scales, that there had to be the transport and one end meeting with the other. Management and employee-employer situations are still the same today. It may be harder today because we have a lot of unions that we didn't have in those days. I think if they'd thought about it, they wouldn't have had that attitude towards management because it wasn't any feather in the cap of management to have to send a man home.

BM: The worker was the worker but he was just practically the worker like being able to be let in on the communications, being able to know what was going on, just to be told.

MM: They used to have their miners' meetings and the rallies were really big but they were quiet for a long time and they seemed to work really great and then they started to get a little bit of agitation and then they formed the coal mine workers union. Did you know that the miners, through their contributions bought the first X-ray machine for the Nanaimo General Hospital?

BM: Really?

MM: Yeah. And Mr. Jim Peacock who lived on Haliburton Street right next to us shortly after we were married when Sandy came back from overseas, he collected the moneys from the miners and put it to the Hospital board. So when the miners needed X-rays, they didn't have to pay for it. But that was taken from their payroll and they bought the first X-ray machine. They contributed well. Greatest football players too some of 'em. Miners you know.

BM: You've got some stories especially rugby teams, the one time they were tops in Canada.

MM: And the football teams, Nanaimo City, a lot of them were made up of fellows that worked in the mines. The majority of them were miners on those teams. Talk about miners now I can think back and think of many fellows that are B.C. Hydro men and that are telephone men, that were city workers, golly I don't think there's
hardly a vocation that they haven't turned their hands to.

BM: When the mines left they went in all different directions.

MM: They lent themselves well to this community believe me.

BM: They survived by readapting themselves.

MM: There's no coal miner in Nanaimo that was had worked here that would ever let Nanaimo die, even though they've moved away, they'll unhold it, just faithfulness to what was here. We know this so when they come back to the reunion, they just love coming to what they call home. You see those fellows at that reunion greeting and just seeing one another. You know we have a turn-over of about 375 every year if they all came at one time, I don't know where we would put them. Because not only 375, I think our last count was around over 500 that we have had at those receptions over those years and some of them come every year, some of them come every other year and the ones that don't come that year come the next year. Which is great because the credit union is very good to us in letting us have that hall free and with what we charge them a dollar and we give them a dollar gift bag and we give them lunch, we still make, you know they have a bar, none of them drink that much really very little but they used to like their grog, their beer. A grog of beer, that's like a mug. That's another thing. Gee I'm deviating but I keep thinking of things. The men didn't have thermoses in their buckets and underneath they would pack their water into the mines for to drink. You know in the bottom of the bucket.

BM: Just lying there in the open ...

MT: Oh no, you know what a double boiler looks like? Well their buckets were similar to that. They put the water in and then the top part fit in just like a double boiler and their lunch would be in there and then their water to drink and many of them on their way home from work would call in to the pub and have a beer then they'd fill that bottom part with draft beer and come home. Then they wouldn't need to go back at night, you see they stayed in their homes and they'd have their noggin of beer at night, which kept the father in with the family at night, instead of going out. They had to have that to get the dust out of their lungs (Laughs). They used to have wonderful times in the pubs they tell me.

BM: It probably didn't do them a lot of good.
MM: The fellowship, this is what they needed. Because they didn't have coffee breaks in the mine so that they could go and talk to each other. So they'd congregate there and have their crack as they used to call it. That's an expression for a conversation. They'd have a crack about what had gone on during the day and so they were just basically great men. I can tell you of a miner, my dad was one, my uncles were one and the great men that I knew. Miners, many of them have passed on I really rever their memories, really high. And those that are still living, I know I can call them friend 'cause I know they call me friend. Just love them. It's a bond of respect and love. My husband's father, Hugh McKay worked in the mines as well and he was a stable boss they called him. He was a veterinarian and Sandy's father worked in the Extension mines as the stable boss and Sandy as a little boy was with his dad in the mine and he has all kinds of stories about Extension, sliding down the slag pile and his mother was great, a great lady that one time the train couldn't get back to Ladysmith and she fed all those men from one shift out of her home. They had it rough. There were no deep freezes and it was just eggs, salt pork bacon they just had to give what they could but they were able to get something in food until the fellows were able to get back to Ladysmith on the train. They made the town because they've given it a history. I'm just sorry that the Number One Tipple was taken down.

BM: What's the tipple?

MM: This is where they used to go down on the cage and you can see the wheels turning that put them down the cage, dropped them down and it's too bad that the cage and the tipple ...

BM: I was wondering exactly what a tipple was

MM: Well the tipple was the thing where the cars came up and it tipped them, the loads you see, but the cage and the tipple head, too bad that they couldn't have been kept.

End of Side One

Side Two

MM: I'm thinking about the mine and that's a hard metal, gold mine but to go down in that mine you know, to walk

BM: Did you ever go down in it?

MM: Oh yes, not our mines here but in Rossland. It wasn't lucky for a woman to go in the mines.
BM: I interviewed a lady, her name was Mrs. Freeman and when she was a girl, she was taken down the mines all the time. She doesn't remember too much.

MM: She's in Kiwanis Lodge?

BM: Yes.

MM: Oh no. Her husband was an engineer. As a matter of fact his lamp is hanging in St. Paul's Church.

BM: She said when she was a little girl.

MM: That maybe but I've never gone down. Could be, could be. Her daughter is Barbara Stannard. She's president of the Museum Society. No one of my age was ever taken in a mine. That's for sure. Women in the mine were unlucky. [That was a no, no.]

BM: Maybe they viewed it on the aspect that women were important because they were the other half of that important bond so it just like the train being stuck, the wife brought all the food. What would they do without her?

BM: My husband and I are managing directors of this motel and we couldn't do it alone. We have to be together to do it.

(More irrelevant talk)

MM: This was the miners attitude. I'm a miner and I don't want another man's trade. I don't want him down digging my coal so I'll pay for my painting to be done. But that had to change. He had to revert, he had to go back and do things for himself, when the mines went out then he had to be the handyman because he couldn't afford it. My father was that way. He wouldn't do anything. I'm a digger and that's all I'm doing. He used to say if someone goes down, if I don't patronize that man how is he going to make a living? I'll have to go dear because I have to get to my bank today. I hope I've given you something. I know you're doing it well and I do hope, I wish you lots of luck with it.

BM: Thank you very much.

Transcribed by Lynne Bowen