Jack Atkinson

... Well then here, here you have your tracks, going in here, you see, well, in order to get your car in so you can shovel in top of it, you here have to what you call "brush" -- they would dig this down, blast it down, or whatever, the rock, on the floor, so that they got a certain height, you see, then, the same over here, see, down to a certain height. (Drawing). And that's your track. That was the old fashioned way. And I should also tell you that later on, they had what they called conveyors along these walls, that carried the coal, and a loader that dumped it in the car. You see. What I've just shown you was the old method. Of earlier days, when my father first come to Nanaimo.

But later on they had what they call the "pan" (?) wall, and it was merely a set of steel -- made in the shape of a trough. I worked at it myself once. And there was a machine at one end, and it just went like that. And it was on what they called a rocker, and it would shake the coal down, and it would go down, till it got down to this point here, then we had to load it in cars. And that was what they called a pan wall. (?)

Then they didn't have to brush up this bottom and...lower it? to get the tracks in, so that they could shovel in the cars.

Q: And that's what they called a pan wall?
A: Pan wall. And that's what the pan wall did, it jerked the coal down. See, and it landed down in here. --Now, what else can I tell you?

Q: Oh, what conditions led up to the organization of the union, and how you did finally manage to get a little nucleus going.
A: Well, when I first started in the mines, and after the big strike when the union was smashed, there was no unions in the coal mine.
The superintendent, mine managers, bosses, were lords and masters. You did what you were told, and said nothing back. Otherwise, you would be fired. Well, after a union gets smashed, as you know, it usually takes quite some time before you're able to get the men really interested in organizing again, because there's that little fear again, of being blackballed, which they were, if you were caught active in unions. So in the early thirties, I don't know for sure whether it was started in Cumberland, or in Nanaimo area, I don't know, I think it was in Cumberland, though, the Nine Workers Union of Canada, which is long defunct, started to organize the mines in this area, in what they called the group system. And the group system -- there was so many in a group, maybe eight, nine, or ten men, and in each group, and
at the head of each group what we called a group leader. It's actually what they call cell system. Now the reason being, was that by only having that small group, you did not know who was in the other groups, you did not know, so that you could, if you were a friend of the bosses, you couldn't tell the boss so-and-so belongs to the union, or organizing it. So that, then you had your little meetings, and you know, it was very scary, when I think back now, you were really afraid of your job. Like, I was the group leader in Ladysmith, in the early thirties, I was the group leader, and also secretary, for all Ladysmith. So that I received, and I alone, knew the correspondences that was coming, in. And that was very little, really. And I was the main distributor for any leaflets.

And they used to publish, what would you call it, a sort of little bulletin. Here in Nanaimo, which was called The Wee Two. Have you heard of it? The Wee Two.

And so We used to distribute that. But I'm a little ahead of my story there. So each leader had a group. I mean each group had a leader. The leaders would meet, also in some secret place. I can think right now, one guy used to allow us to meet in his barn. He was a miner, but he had a farm. And you would meet, and you would make certain decisions. And then you would carry it back to your group. And then your group would either agree or disagree, or discuss, or whatever the case may be. Or make offerings? or so on. Which you as leader again, would take back, to the leaders. Now, as a leader, I did not know who was in Syd's group. He would have a group. I didn't know who was in his group, but I knew that he was a leader. And you were a leader. But I don't know the men who was in your group.

So but this was a very slow and tedious way of doing it. Although, for a {in} beginner it was the only safe way. So, also you knew, that if one of your men got fired -- let's say he was a good worker, nothing wrong with him, but he got fired, then you could say, well now who in my group has squealed? Who has squealed? On Joe, here. Somebody has. He's got fired. You see.

That really -- I didn't ever see that happen. But that was the reason for that type of organization. And then again, we would get these bulletins or little papers, the Wee Two, and spread them out, you know. Scatter them out, amongst the men. And they would be maybe nailed up in a car that goes down the mine, car that circulates all over the mine, you know. Everybody sees it some time, you know.
So, and then there'd be all kinds of things appear, you know, like maybe on safe practices, or any other thing that was happening in the mine. That wasn't good for the workers.

Q: Who put it out? Was it printed, or what?
A: Printed? Yes, well, mimeographed.

Q: Who by?
A: Well, that's it. That was all secret. I couldn't even tell you in Nanaimo that, sitting right here. There might be some men around who could tell you who did what, but I couldn't, 'cause I was in Ladysmith. I couldn't. That's how secret it was. And -- gee, I've forgotten the name of the man that was the organizer. Joe!... what was his name.

But anyway, he was killed. He joined the Macp-Tap battalion and went to Madrid, in Spain, and he was killed, just outside of Madrid. I just had his name on the end of my finger tips. I might think of it before we leave. And he was our organizer. Now he'd probably have two or three men, maybe very secretive, who would be mimeographing then, and making stencils, and so on to get the sheet out.

I can remember meeting, in the Finn Hall, as it was known then, maybe on a Saturday night, when they wouldn't expect anybody to be holding a meeting, all the blinds down, and even keep their voice low, that's how bad it was, --Well, as I said, this was a very tedious method, working at it. And I don't know, we would get the hard core, union conscious men, to join the group, --but, to get all of them, it would take too long, and it was quite impossible. Because you was very much afraid of anybody that didn't show any leniency.

All your men, all the men that did belong, would be listening in the mine for somebody making exposing themselves, maybe angry about something, saying "It's time there was a bloody union here," or something, you know, words like that. Or an outburst of any sort, or even just talking, you would be listening to the conversation, and maybe spot men who you felt that you could approach, and approach safely. And this did happen continuously.

So but then, I guess it was about 1936, or maybe '36 or '37, I think, about '36, I would say, the United Mine Workers stepped in. And took over. Now just what happened to the Mine Workers' Union I'm not clear, but anyway it just disappeared. That's the only word I can say. Disappeared.
And the United Mine Workers come in, of course, with their huge organization. And money. And they just came right out, in the open, and organized the miners, and called open meetings, and then it got too strong. The bosses couldn't do much about it. If they'd a fired anybody it would have triggered maybe a strike, or something. So they just didn't.

So that the Mine Workers got a hold, and I think, if I remember right, signed the first agreement with John Hunt, who was the superintendent, or mine manager here in Nanaimo, in the big mines here, Number One. And I think there was something like about, probably about 4000 miners in this whole area, at that time, see. So it was quite a -- quite -- in fact I've got a picture at home. My brother was part of that. And also my father, as a matter of fact -- he's on this picture, as the negotiating team that first met with John Hunt, and organized the mine workers at that time. So ever since then, of course, the Mine Workers were organized in the UMWA, and the United Mine Workers of America, head with the office in Calgary, I think that's what they called District 18.

Alberta and B.C.

Q: What do you remember about the 1912 strike?

A: Well, when the strike began, I'd be a boy of about seven. And by the time it ended, and by the time my father got a job I was about nine or ten, you know. And I have a lot of recollections. And what you hear too, when you hear your mother and father talking, when you're a boy -- I can remember the rioting, and so on. And I can remember even the wives of the strike breakers being escorted to the Post Office and the store to get the mail, by special police. And us kids used to grab -- in those days it was all kerosene lights, and we used to buy kerosene in those square cans, that the women also used to boil their clothes in, on wash day. And we used to get those, and tie a string around their neck, and go down the road behind these women, which was maybe a little unfair, maybe the women, no matter what they thought, couldn't help what their husbands did. But anyway we'd yell "You dirty scab! Dirty scab!" and beat these tin cans. And that was one thing I can remember as a kid's part in it. And of course we did learn the songs, like Bowser's Seventy Two.

Q: Can you sing it?

A: I can’t sing period. Anyway, so I can remember a lot of that. I can remember the rioting, and one particular incident I can remember, which went through here, which was a short cut...
into South Wellington. Just before the rioting, this man who was a friend of my father's, from England, the same part of England, he was drowned at a picnic, down at Nanaimo River, just over the bridge. He was drowned, and my father looked after the burial, and so on. Then, his mother was still alive in England, and was not happy until someone came out here and seen to it -- she was very religious -- that he was properly buried. So, his uncle, and a friend came out. And they arrived, in Nanaimo, was the night of the riot, and so here's these two English guys, with suitcases and so on, which strikers would normally take to be scabs. But my dad was there to meet them, and he says, "It's all right, fellas, it's all right!" you know. And my dad, and this was in the middle of the night, well, maybe after 11 o'clock or 12, my dad took them through the Black road, and when he got so far through, these guys come jumping out with clubs and sticks, you know. "Where the hell you going?" you know. And my dad says, "It's all right, you know, I'm Jack Atkinson! I'm Jack Atkinson!" And this is Jimmie Kennedy, his uncle. "Oh, then that's fine! Away you go!" (Laughter). But these were some of the things -- I can remember my dad getting home and I think that's one reason why my dad was never picked up, because he was taking care of these fellows that particular night, see?

Q: So, what was going on that night? Can you remember him telling you?
A: Well, oh I guess there was men marauding around and looking for strike-breakers to beat 'em up, if they could find them. And so on, you know.

Q: Fires?
A: Well not in our area, you know. Around South Wellington. They burned the superintendent's house down and one of our neighbors next day was wearing a Panama hat down there! My dad says (laughter) he says Look at him... go... that's Cunningham's hat! he says. (laughter).

But then, up around Cumberland and that it was pretty bad too. They reckoned that some of the guys was carrying guns, and so on. But we just lived over the ridge from Davie MacDonald, in what is known at Scotstown, in South Wellington. And my dad had a little horse, which had been a racing horse in its younger days. It was still awfully fat. And I think I pointed out to you before, I'd be about seven years old when the strike started, so my dad was 20 years older than me, so he'd be 27, see. So he used to, himself sometimes, there were other times, lend the horse to -- well it was a mare -- lend the horse to other guys and there was a road between Extension and South Wellington, 3 this
And that's what we called the bull pen, because there was a sort of a little camp there, and that's where the bulk of the scabs lived, inside and it was a boarding house, boarding house, the company boarding house. Company houses, they were. And they lived in there. Well sometimes if they wanted to (move from nine to nine), they would come across through this road way on a (troll ?) from Extension. You know, in Scotchtown, see, back over those ridges. And Dad used to scout in there with his mare, you see, and if you spotted anybody that looked suspicious, and he didn't know then, he'd go, he would gallop back, into South Wellington and say there's some scabs coming in. Then the boys would go up there and if they could they'd stop them. Sometimes they got fooled, they were perfectly innocent guys. But anyway, these are some of the things that really went on.

Q: And you were saying in Cumberland, the thing that you think really started it...

A: Yes, well I was told by a man who was there, and he says the rioting as actually triggered in Cumberland, by the fact that there was quite a number of scabs --there were in all areas, Nanaimo here, South Wellington, Extension, everywhere, there was quite a number. But they were still outnumbered by strikers. And they were going to parade up through Cumberland in a display of strength, maybe, and so the law always advised not to use violence, because anyone knows that you're going to get the worst of it, because they'll bring in extra police, they'll bring in the militia, or whatever. Especially in those days. And so he said they come marching up the street, and he was a young fellow then, this particular man, and as such, he stayed in this Waverly hotel. With a whole lot of other young people, you know. And a whole bunch of them was standing on the street there, and when the parade got right off, so this one guy, a young guy, feeling hot and heavy possibly, jumped out and he smashed the first one in the line. With his fist. And there started a mélée. And then communications in those days not being what they are today, or for a long time, I guess there would be a telephone from here to there.
Well there would be, the E&N anyway. There would be. Although the E&N doesn't go to Cumberland, either. So the news was slow in coming. And probably quite inaccurate. So the story got down here that the scabs had started to raise a little bit of hell with the strikers. So they started to raise a little big of hell with the scabs. And that's supposed to have been what triggered the strike. (riot, is probably what he meant.). Whether it is exactly true or not I don't know. I mean the rioting, not the strike.

You know what started the strike, don't you? Well, in all the mines, and still is, the men select two men to examine the mine once a month. I think once a month, or possibly twice. At least once. And looking for gas. And they go in the mines, and they go round the faces of all the mines, and they check for gas. And if there is gas, they're supposed to report it. So in Cumberland, two of these men who had been selected by the men to act as a gas committee, reported gas. And were immediately fired. Now gas is a dangerous thing if you light it. And specially in those days, because in those days, I'm not sure just what kind of lights they used down the mines, or in Cumberland, But they were naked lights anyway, or what's called safety light, which is a very poor light. Just something like a candle. Otherwise they might have used these fish oil lamps, and I have one at home, by the way, it belonged to my father -- or carbide lamps, which is only later on. But that was supposed to, as I said, I can't verify this for sure, but there could be others that would, but this was what was supposed to have triggered the strike.

But in the meantime, remember this. The United Mine Workers already had the men organized, to some extent. Otherwise they would never have walked out spontaneously. Under this type of pressure. But which they did. So then they struck. Maybe this was the key -- the what do you call it -- there's a word for it, I can't think of it. This is probably what triggered the strike. It was this, as far as I know.
After the strike had ended in '14 and it was the day before my brother's birthday. Now I remember that was my mother wouldn't make a birthday cake, there was so much grief right around us.

Q: What mine was that?
A: Pacific Coast Coal mine, South Wellington, right here.

Q: What happened?
A: Well, just how shall I say it? They blew a hole through, into the Southfield Mines, and the Southfield Mine was full of water, and when they done that, all the water poured into the Pacific Coast Coal Mine, and trapped 18 men which were lower than where the water came in. That was February 9, 1915. There was much grief, and so on, at that particular time. The men, of course, was rushed from all sides, pumps was rushed in, and so on, maybe from wherever they could get them, and they started pumping water immediately. But there was no hope of saving the men that was trapped. They was trapped and drowned. There was some that got out, with water right up to their necks. They just barely got out of the mine. The man who was the overman at the mine, or was commonly called the pitboss, he was out of the mine, and he heard what had happened, and he went down, and he went down to a point where he was trapped, and died. And his name is right up on a stone in the cemetery now. His name is Joe Foley (?). And there was another case of heroism too. Another man got out. His name was Bill Anderson, and he said to the men setting around there, he says, Is Bob Miller out, who was his brother-in-law. And they said No, Bob is not here. And he went down, to see if he could find or see Bob, possibly help him, and he too was trapped. In the mine. Just a straight case of heroism. And of course he died there too. And they was very close neighbours of ours, these people. And another very sad thing in those days, I don't know whether you know this, Myrtle. You maybe do. But there was no compensation act, or anything of that sort, and as a result, there was nothing for the widows, except that they go out and scrub floors or take in wading or take in boarders. Which many of them did. You could sue the company if you had the money to do it, Now whether the companies gave money to these women or not, I'm not at all sure. I don't know. But I know there was no such a thing as a compensation act.
Because that only came into being in 1917. On January 1st. So all the men and so on that was killed or hurt in the mines in those days depended upon their own resources, you might say. To feed their children and carry on. It was a cruel world. And that brings up another point. That is when also a fraternal orders flourished. Because they, as a rule, most of them anyway, had a benefit fund of, they used to pay a dollar a day, you see. So there was Eagles and oh, all sorts of different fraternal organizations. That had what they call a sick benefit, you see. So that was the only help people who were hurt, or sick, that was the only help that they got, is probably from the fraternal organization. Although, if a man was hurt or sick, for a period of a long time, as a rule, his fellow workmen would take up a collection and give them to the family. To help them along the way. That did occur, quite often.

Q: I guess when this compensation act came in in 1917 it wouldn't be retroactive then?

A: Oh no. 

Q: It wouldn't help the orphans left in that flood?

A: No. Or any other thing -- those big explosions in Extension, or explosions prior to that. I think in 1908 or 09 or something there was a explosion at Number One mine in Nanaimo here, / they had an explosion. Reserve Mine, had an explosion. But I just don't know the dates. But it was earlier than this. And many, many men were killed. And again, sometimes, I know it happened in one particular case, in Nanaimo, where collections was taken, and this woman started up a little grocery business. And make a go of it.

Another thing in those days too, all the businesses, particularly the food business, was all just small stores, there were no supermarkets. or things of that sort. And most of the time, they carried the people, on bill, and then you paid it off when you could. But that could only go on so long and only to say, relatively a few people. Because they couldn't afford to carry people on their back indefinitely either. But they did have that little advantage.

Q: Syd said we should get a history of them too, people who carried the strikers.

A: Well that would be pretty hard to find now. Because many of them have died. The era that we're talking of you know, has got to go back 75 or 80 years.
So it would be very difficult to find anyone that was in business then. I can think of different people, but I know they're dead, long ago, you know.

Q: Do you remember the names of the stores, any of them? Where did you shop?

A: Well my mother and father shopped on Haliburton Street here, is it a Red and White Store now? Well, that store, at that particular time, was owned by a woman by the name of Mrs. Loyd. She started it. She was a woman whose husband was killed in the explosion in Number One mine. And I know she carried my parents. And maybe many, many others. The men had set her up in business, you add see, and she did. And that woman she's been dead for maybe 40, 50 years. And I doubt -- I don't think she had any family either. I don't think she had any offspring, let's put it that way.

So there used to be another one in South Wellington by the name of George Taylor. I can mention his name all right. He was quite good. And there was another store keeper by the same name, but Joe Taylor. And I'm not sure whether he carried people very much or not. A lot of people felt that he was doing something he shouldn't have been doing because he was during the miner's strike supplying them with groceries...

Another little thing... xthxxx (laughter) there used to be in Ladysmith a very astute business man, John Vickler? and he allowed people to run a bill, you know, and let it go to the end of the month, and then they paid their bill, you know. And this man, he was so busy this particular day, someone come in and she bought a pair of shoes, for one of her sons. And she got the shoes and went out. And afterwards he couldn't remember who it was that had bought the pair of shoes. So that day, from there on, he put down a pair of shoes on everybody's bill, that come in.

And there was only three people complained. He got paid for all of these shoes. And only three women come in and said "I never got a pair of shoes on that particular day!" (laughter) Some of the humorous asides to these things too, you know, in fact, lots of them.

Q: How did you start in the mines?

A: Myself? I started picking rock and I think I was about three months on that job. Incidentally I can remember my first wages, it was $2.81. Per day. Not hour. Well I was raised on a small farm, I guess maybe I was fairly strong. And large for my age. And I was only there for about three or four months when I got promoted to another job. A more responsible job than just picking rock off the conveyor belt. Or conveyor cable, I should say. So I got an increase
of pay, I don't know, it would be over three dollars, anyway.

For this other job. And I stayed on that job until that

I got too small, for me. And then I kept a naggin' at my father and

he finally took me down the mines when I was about

seventeen. I didn't have a miner's certificate, but at that time

you could go and work with your father as a sort of a helper,

if you want to call it that, you see. But if you're on contract,

you got everything that you need. But if you're on what they call

basic pay. I should explain this maybe to you.

They got so much a ton for the coal. Okay, if you're in

places, we used to call them, in this tunnel,

if you were able to make wages, well and good. But the conditions

in that place maybe three quarters of it was rock, and you couldn't

make wages on the coal, they always paid you what they call a basic

rate. At that time I'm talking about is about $5.25 a day. In that

case my father would probably get about $6.00 a day or more and I'd

get a little less. You see. Because we were doing the same work,

there was others besides me, but I mean there was a lot of fathers

had their sons down, particularly right after the first world war,

because that's when it was, because they were short of miners. And

so on. So that's how I started. I started right digging coal

at the

with my father. And there I stayed for 18 months.

Q: How was it when you first went down? Was it right over your

head, did you have to start in a small hole, or what?

A: Oh no. It's hard to explain to you. It's all like tunnels, maybe

seven or eight feet high. And they used to be 12 feet wide. And

your face could be six, seven, eight, ten, twelve feet high,

depending on the seam of coal that you were taking out. And on this

island, the seam is very irregular. And one day you'll have a

beautiful seam of coal eight foot high, or ten foot high, and the

next day it started to nip right down to almost nothing. And

that's why, in that point in time, you wouldn't be able to make

money, under the contract. Well then, if they wanted to continue,

what you might say, prospecting ahead, because it might rise up

again, they would have to pay you then the basic ...

Q: You would have to work sometimes on your knees?

A: Oh no, there was lots of room. There was no such a thing as

-- in Nanaimo here where there was a low seam, they were.
But I should tell you this. The mine I started, the Number Five at South Wellington, **Nanaimo**/Canadian Collieries. Put that was what we call stall and pillar work. And that means that you drive tunnels (drawing) like this and like this. And this thing in the middle, is what you call the pillar. And you leave that, until you're finished with it. And then they take that out coming back. Then in Nanaimo here, mainly in Nanaimo, I think practically all the mines here, where what they call the long wall system -- now I'm describing to you the mines -- and that was low, and the mine -- the seam was cut with a machine, underneath. You know, they had a machine for that. And they mine it out underneath, and then they put holes (?) in and blast it down. That's long wall. Buy that's low. Then is when you're working on your knees.

In the mines I worked in, mainly you're standing up working. Just like working in here. Six, eight, nine, ten feet, whatever.

Q: When you had that pillar standing up, tunnels would go off in various directions?

A: Give me your pencil. Well, suppose here's your tunnel, see, going like this. Well okay. Then you can only go so far, and here's another tunnel over here, you see? And then you go down, and you continue to go on down, and then, this is what you call a crotch-cut. And then you go from here to here, and here to here, and that would be about forty feet, maybe.

Q: Oh yes, like an H.

A: Then again, you would come across here, with another, like that, see? And continue on down. This is what they call the pillar.

Q: So that would eventually all cove out?

A: Oh yes.

Q: But would it all have to be timbered and/or supported in some way?

A: Oh yes, this has all got to be timbered.

But these pillars are not little pillars you know. They're oh, maybe 40, 50 feet square. Maybe 60 feet square. And that's solid, see. Okay, I can describe it now to you. So it's here. Let's say it's here. They got to the end of the workings. To the limit of their say. Or say the coal (peters?) out and they knew there's no coal ahead, because they drill ahead, you know. Then they start, and do this. Take that out, then take that out. And take that cut, and take that out. Till it's all taken out. Then, by about this time, this'd start caving down.
Q: Is there any chance of a cave-in?
A: Yes, that does cave down. Unless it's a conglomerate roof and then you might be able to take out a dozen of these pillars without it caving down. But normally, under a normal roof, this would come down. But then you're working in here -- see maybe you've started there. I should explain to you something more if you want me to. This is what you call a cross cut. And the reason you got to have these is for ventilation. So let's say you've driven the air. You've got what they call a -- something like this, and it's made of boards, see. We call them brattish, but it's really brattice boards. They used to say "brattish" but it's really brattice.

So then you put this in here -- the air comes down here. I should have stopped here. Well, let's do it here. So you've driven to here. And this thing comes down like this. So the air comes down -- this is your face, what they call the face area. So the air comes down here and comes back up here. Circulates. And very well too. Sometimes it's blowing so hard it's even quite cool. But when you get so far, that fails to be practical now. So then you drive a crosscut. To here. And this has the same thing. In here, you see. So then what happens, here you are, you're going on, driving down here. So this is all torn out here, and then you start here, and you put it again, and you then the air goes down, and up through here. Then when you come to a place where you're going to do this all over again, that is what they call a stopping is put in there. It's boarded off. So that the air doesn't short circuit. It goes on down here. And back over, you see. And that's your ventilation system. And of course this circulation of air is all done by a big fan outside. And this is what we call the return area. So let's say you're starting from the surface here, let's say that's the surface. When you go down -- let's say when you're starting to mine -- let's make a mine -- they start a tunnel down here, and you also start one here. See? And then over, on top here, on top of the ground there'll be a fan placed. You see. Which pulls the air out. So now all right. When it's the appropriate time, they'll drive a crosscut here. And then you continue on down. With a tunnel, like this, you it comes out. See. Then the air comes to circulate, let's say this is where the shaft is, the return airway. Then the air is pulled out, there might be miles and miles of area, so the air circulates all around in that manner.
Q: So when there's a cave-in, of course, you've got the danger of gas, and
A: No, it's cleared up right away. Because let's say it caves in, it's just like if this roof came down, --let's say the roof of this tunnel caved in. It's got a roof over it... and block this down here. But then the air goes over the top. It doesn't cave in solidly. So there's nothing more harm done there. There's no danger whatever. In that case.
Q: But men can be trapped in there, can't they?
A: No, no. Well, yes you can, but -- actually you just climb out over the top. The first thing you gotta do if you got a cave-in in a tunnel like that is clean it out.
Q: Have you ever been stuck in a cave-in?
A: No, and I don't know of anybody else that has. I guess it is possible the all right. Only where there is an explosion, where a whole maze of tunnels is all collapsed, because of an explosion, then you are trapped, down there. But even then, not completely. That's where your rescue team comes in. They go down there, they clear just as much as is required to get the men out, or mules, or horses, or whatever.
Q: Have you ever seen any of these rescue teams in action?
A: Oh yes, the rescue teams. But not in real action. Only in practice and competition. Where they build a mine outside, and they simulate the whole thing. That's all I've seen -- I've never seen an actual explosion or anything like that.
Q: Well tell me about these men coming back now, about the mule, who knows that it's quitting time.
A: Well okay. It's the same mine I worked in. Here's a tunnel, wa-ny down at the bottom. Nineteen and a half miles down there. And there's a telephone. And a telephone outside. Well, men are not allowed to walk up that main tunnel while a trip is going up. In case a coupling breaks, or the rope breaks. Somebody's going to get killed. So you wait, down here. You all come to an assembly, down here. And all the mules are there, and all the horses are there. That is, I'm talking about where the horses go outside. And then, this rope rider, the guy that rides the rope and hooks them on and off and all that, he gets outside -- this is the way it was there -- it's not every place that's the same...
So when he gets outside he would just ring the telephone bell, and this bell would ring. Then everybody knows that all's clear, way you go. And the mules knew this too, and the horses, and away they would go, with mules hanging on to their collars, you know the collars around their neck, and
hanging on to their tails, and heading for outside as fast as they could go. (laughter).

Q: What is a rope rider?
A: Well, let's say this is a slope. This is a flat here, so it's hard to describe. But actually, it's a slope, see, so and you've got a track down. And you've got a hoist up at the top, and here's a tunnel going down. And a track, in here. See? Rough, mind you, this is rough. And like that. Well down here is all the tunnels going off, and coal is all to here. This might be on the level, here, so then in here is a siding. And in here is a siding. All down here, and all switches. And the same all the way down.

Q: With tracks going down?
A: With tracks in all the tunnels, sure. And this is the winch, oh? And then the cars are all hooked on to this rope here, you see. Like that. Let's say these is empty, and you're going down with 'em. The rope rider is the guy that rides on there, sends them in here, unhooks this max rope off, and hooks onto the loaded ones. There'll be loaded ones in here. And he'll put his empties in there, hook on to the loaded ones, and away you go outside.

Q: What's pulling the cars?
A: This winch.

Q: When there were mules, then what?
A: There's no mules on the tracks. The mules are on the flat areas, into the face. You see, it's a maze of tunnels. They're all over the countryside, going this way and that. Way and this way and that way. And so in Granby mine, where Syd worked, and where I worked, down in Cassidy there, there was no mules or horses. Because it was all too steep. And it was all done by hoists. And winches. Small hoists and winches. So about the horses and mules. So they pulled these cars out on to these sidings, from everywhere, wherever, on to these sidings, from all over the place. And then let's say, I've shown three here, but the mine I worked in was a six car, Granby was an eight. You see. So he comes down, and puts them in there, and if there's eight cars there he picks them up and takes them outside, then goes down to another place where there'll be cars waiting, and then when the empties come down, the driver, or the mule skinner, they take these empty cars and distribute them to the miners at the face, who then fills them with coal.
Q: But how in the world would he know where to go? In that maze of tunnels?
A: Huh! You can’t go anywhere, except where the tracks’ll take him.
A: He can only go to here. He can’t go any further. You see. And you’re working in here. You’re driving a horse in here. You’re told where to go. Driving a horse down here, and I’m driving a horse over here. And over here, and down here, and over here.
Q: So who’s got it in their head as to where all these places are? To direct the men to them?
A: You don’t have to direct them. The guys know where to go. You know that you’re going back up to Nanaimo river tonight.
Syd: Coal miners can do that.
A: Oh, once you been down there you know where you’re going. Oh, the first time you’re down, somebody’ll take you. For instance, if you were just starting. You know, wannabeman brand new man, they’d say to the driver (boss)? take this man in to work at so and so. So you’re taken to so and so and just briefly shown what’s what, and he’s on his own.
Q: Well you’d think it would take quite a while, because you say when you’re coming out, there’s tunnels all over the place?
A: I don’t mean they’re just as thick as, you know -- ‘they’re way far apart, like this, for instance...’
Q: And you’ve only got your own light to go by, haven’t you?
Q: But you are alone?
A: Oh yes. Well, it all depends. At the face, miners, at the face, they usually work in pairs. But it only takes one man to drive one mule. It only takes one man to drive one hoist. And one rope rider on that trip. You don’t need two. Sometimes they did have a switcher. But he would stay down here. And he would signal the guy here to go down there, wherever there was a trip ready, six cars, you see, to take out. I guess.
Q: And how the mules would know where to go anyway.
A: Oh gee yes. Some of those mules knew as much as the drivers. They were very smart. And they also know when they don’t want you to put the harness on them. They know what that means too. Means work!
You were saying before the good mules often got a double shift.

What happened?

Well sometimes -- because in those days people didn't take much time off. People were too poor actually, the wages weren't big. And sometimes you'd only work three or four days a week, maybe if it was slack time that was particularly -- the hungry thirties hit the mines in around 1933-1934. I was first laid off because of slack time in 1924. South Wellington mines closed down. In 1924.

Because of slack time. So you didn't lose too much time. But anyway, suppose the man who was cross-shifting you (?) -- as I explained before, these shifts, commencing at 7 and ending at 3, commencing at 3, ending at 11, commencing at 11, ending at 7 in the morning, and 8 hours back to bank (?) and you don't have no lunch hour, you just eat whenever you feel like it. But you don't sit down and take an hour, or anything like that. You eat on what we say, on the fly. Well, okay, suppose the man that's cross-shifting you, suppose I'm working on the morning shift, 7 to 3, and a man doesn't show up for the 3 o'clock shift, will they get word to me, or either I get outside and they'll tell me to go back down, you see. Damn for a double shift. Till 11 o'clock at night. I'm not sure that that's permitted now. But anyway, they'll say/Pick your own mule. Away you're going to go back down again. And when you got back down, they would send a sack of hay, and maybe a few oats, and water, for the horse. And nothing for you. You depended or the fellows that you were working with, they for them to give you a sandwich or something. Sometimes you'd end up with more than you'd have had if you'd had your own lunch bucket. But most of the time, they would give you a sandwich, somebody else would give you a piece of cake.

Q: What about the mule though?

A: Oh the mule was fine.

Q: But he wanted to get out too.

A: Oh yes, well he has to go back down. Boot him in the rear end. He has to go back down. Oh sure. (laughter) --So -- there was just some of the vignettes. (laughter) of life!

That pretty well describes -- of course, as I was saying, the system of mining around Nanaimo here was something different. When you had the long wall work. And then you didn't have these pillars. You see, they went in this way, and just took the whole thing as they went. Timbered it up. And then when they got away from there, they'd move a lot of track into here, this might save
But you see, what I mean? And they would just keep on moving ahead like that. It would be solid, no tunnels. But it was low. Those seams that were worked that way because of the fact that they are low, that's why they worked on the long wall, which was the more economical, see?

Q: What would you call low?
A: Well, two, three, four feet. Four feet would be a high one.

Q: You worked bent over, then?