This is Myrtle Berren interviewing Herschel Biggs on June 6, 1977, for the Coal Tyee Project.

MB: My father, Harry Biggs, was born in Nanaimo in 1856. He started working while very young in the mines in Wellington, for a number of years. Then when they started to sink Number One mine, he contracted sinking the shaft. Then he dug coal so he became a fire boss, which was before the big explosion, which killed 175 men, including my uncle, George Biggs. My father quit working in Nanaimo mines in 1906, and started his own mine on our farm in Wellington, till he died in 1911. Then my brother worked the coal mine for a number of years.

MB: Whereabouts was this mine in Wellington.

HB: On the south side of Frannan Lake was where the farm was, and it was up on the top part.

MB: Was it anywhere near Loudon’s?

HB: Yes, well it pretty well connected in with Loudons at the top.

MB: Was Mr. Loudon’s father there then too?

HB: No, the father was manager of that big farm for Dunsmuir. And after the first war, Billie Loudon started his mine there in Wellington.

MB: Yes, so you had coal on your land?

HB: Yes. We had our own coal rights, you see. But Billie Loudon, that belonged to the Collieries.

MB: Oh I see. They were quite complicated, those coal rights.

HB: Yes, oh yes. Because our farm was taken up before Dunsmuir put the railroad through. And then he got all coal -- mineral rights, for all the land -- forty miles each side of the railway.

MB: And I heard that Mr. Dunsmuir gave 700 acres to the Soldier Settlement Board -- was that right?

HB: I think the government bought that off him, and then they divided it into five parcels.

MB: And Bill Loudon got quite a bit.

HB: Yes, Bill Loudon, and Charlie Stransch, then the Salmon brothers, then Maxies. And then there was another one down towards East Wellington, and I just forget who was the fifth one.

MB: So when were you born, Mr. Biggs?

HB: 1893. In Nanaimo. Up on the south end, on Gillespie Street.

MB: Did your mother have a doctor, or --

HB: Well she had eight kids! Eight lived -- I don’t know how many died.

MB: My goodness they had big families in those days!

HB: Yes, there were six brothers, and I’m the only one left.
HB: I've got two sisters.
MB: What were the names of your brothers?
HB: Jack, Tom, Bill, Harry, and mine was Herschel, and James, the younger brother.
MB: They certainly got a lot of young coal miners in your family!
HB: Well the four oldest ones they worked in the mines in Nanaimo. And the younger one he worked in his own mine up in Wellington there. And I worked in that, and I worked in Timberland mine, about 1927. No, it'd be about 1928.
MB: What happened to these small mines?
HB: They closed down -- well, the depression was coming, you know, and then in the forties they started up again.
MB: It didn't peter out then?
HB: Well it pretty well --
MB: There's not that much coal left up in Wellington then?
HB: No, not unless they go down deeper and into lower seams.
MB: And then nobody's got the money for it except big --
HB: That's it!
MB: And what did you hear about your uncle George Biggs? In this big disaster?
HB: Oh yes, when they opened that part of the mine later on, they found bones and clothing and that. Cause they sealed it off, because after the explosion it took fire and they just sealed it off. And the bodies was all left in there.
MB: I wonder how long afterwards they opened it up again?
HB: Well if you see Alex Menzies, he would be in the mines at that time, and he would tell you what year. There was a whole bunch of Chinese and whites too.
MB: I understand that some of them had not died right away, but they had been walled off by the collapse...
HB: Yes, well to stop the fire, you see. They had to seal it. They couldn't get no air. It'd burn itself out.
MB: And I heard they'd left messages on shovels and things like that.
HB: I wouldn't know. The ones that had been working in there would find things like that.
MB: Well how many generations of your family before they came, how far back were they coal miners?
HB: Well my grandfather he landed in Nanaimo in 1854, but he wasn't a miner. He come out with them, from England, and -- but he was more of a carpenter and that. And so he did a lot of that kind of work.
Then he took up a farm towards Duke Point there. He pre-empted 160 acres there. But now they got the house that he built out of logs. And it's Heritage.

MB: Yes, I've heard about that. In fact I think I saw a picture of it.

MB: Oh you can see the little white house over there from Nanaimo when it's clear.

MB: That goes a long way back.


MB: I would be in the third, and my daughter's the fourth, and her children's the fifth.

MB: When did you start working in the mine?

MB: After the first war. After I come back. I worked for the CPR on the railroad there, for 10 years, and then the depression came, and in between I worked a while in the mines there.

MB: What were you, a digger?

MB: No, I was just a helper. My father-in-law he was running the machine, and I was scraping behind him. He was running a punching machine. Punching all the dirt out in between the seams of coal.

MB: What was the name of the girl you married?

MB: Nora Clayton.

MB: Was she of a coal mining family?

MB: Her father was, yes. He come out from England. He'd worked in the mines.

MB: And you met her here in Nanaimo?

MB: Oh yes, she was in Northfield there, and we got married in 1926. My daughter was born in '27. Now they're getting scattered around.

MB: What did they have, did they have dance halls and things like that then?

MB: Oh yes. We had a dance hall in Northfield, and Wellington, Nanaimo, up the Oddfellows Hall, it was where Woolworths is now.

MB: And what about the Pygmy?

MB: That was where the bowling alley is now. They turned it into a bowling alley.

MB: Then there was the Finn Hall, eh?

MB: Yes, Chase River. On Extension road there.

MB: I guess they had real good floors in those days, better than today?

MB: Oh yes, they put lots of wax on 'em you know, for sliding.

MB: And then what did you do on Sundays, when you had a day off?

MB: Oh, go fishing, go huntin', we always did a lot of hunting around
deer hunting and birds and that, so ... 

MB: Did they have any church activity or anything like that?

HB: Oh yes, they had different ones you know. Different churches had different goin'-ons there. Down at Wellington and that.

MB: I was just wondering if the miners, like I asked Dr. Hall yesterday if he thought the miners were God-fearing people, or if they were otherwise. If they were not, you know.

HB: They didn't go much on religion. They worked hard and they went to the beer parlors, the hotels, and had their beer on the way home, before they even got washed.

MB: Well our neighbor, he was an old coal miner. xx when he died he didn't want to have a service of any kind. That was it, no gathering,

HB: No. My wife died here two years ago, and we belonged to the memorial Society, and they just took her body straight from the hospital and it was cremated, and that was it. No service or nothing. That's -- that's the easiest way, and --

MB: Yes, I admired that. I had never heard that before, and I thought to myself What a sensible way of doing things.

HB: Yes. Because in the old days they was mourning for four or five days. there, with that body there, then they'll go and bury it, well it brings it all back. This way, nobody knew about it, for a day or so, and everything was over with. And that's the way I'm goin' too. They don't need to cry over me. (chuckle). I had my life, and that's the way I feel, the way I want.

MB: Yes, and what do you think about the hereafter, or whether there is one?

HB: When the tree falls, it dies, that's the end of it, see. It goes back into the earth, and that's it. And I figure the same way with the body. When you go, you're cremated, as to the hereafter, I'm doubtful, whether there is any.

MB: There must be a lot of people that think that, you know. There's something about mining, or logging, where people do think that way.

HB: That's it!

MB: Were you ever in any accidents?

HB: No.

MB: Well that was fortunate. How many years did you work in the mines?

HB: Off and on, two or three years. I didn't like it, because I like to see the sunshine. I'd sooner work outside, where it's daylight.

MB: How did it feel to you when you went in there?

HB: Well, it just come natural when you had to make a livin'. You'd go in there, you had your light, and they'd show you the way and --
MB: Had you been used to going down your own mine?
MB: Oh yes.
MB: So as you grew up you got used to it?
MB: Oh yes.
MB: Was it wet in your mine?
MB: Oh some times. In winter it used to get pretty wet. And it'd have to close down till maybe in the spring till it got good again. Oh, the rain used to come in and seep down through, yes. Unless you had a good drainage.
MB: How did you get your coal out to some ship or train or whatever?
MB: Well, we used to have a railroad down on to ours/when the big company were at Extension. And they on the box cars -- coal cars down, they were like 50 tons, a car. But then when we worked after that we used to just stack it on the ground and then trucks would come out and get it and -- they used to come down from Courtenay and Campbell River. Haul it up there, Alberni and everything. There was no mines up that way.
MB: And you sold it to private people.
MB: Yes.
MB: And the rain didn't hurt it at all?
MB: No. I can go out and pick you up coal that's been laying on the ground for the last forty years and it's just as hard as the day it came out. It will burn just as good. I know that. My niece's boy down in California there, he was wanting some, so --and his father wouldn't take him out and hunt for some, so I went out and picked some, and they sent some down to him, and the teacher she said I've heard of it, but I've never seen. And so she wanted to have a look at it. Small pieces, about so big. And it was pieces just like a rock. And it was that hard. So I think they made a little fire just to try it, and let it burn.
MB: Did you ever see any of the Dunsmuir's?
MB: No. My father went to school with them.
MB: That would be with James Dunsmuir?
MB: Yes.
MB: And Keighleys used to live on the Dunsmuir place?
MB: Yes, well the old house is tore down now.
MB: Have Keighleys ever been miners or anything? Or farmers?
MB: I wouldn't know that.
MB: And do you remember when the ship the Oscar blew up in 19 --
MB: We was out in Wellington and we heard the explosion out there.
MB: That would be ten miles away, from Protection Island.
MB: Yes. As the crow flies it would be about six miles.
MB: No damage done out there?
MB: No.
MB: And what about when the powder works blew?
HE: Well, the odd one got killed there. At the powder works.
MB: I guess you had to be a powder man and everything in your job.
HE: Well, my brother there, he had his fire boss ticket. And he looked after that.
MB: Which brother was that?
HE: James.
MB: I was told there were 28 beer parlors in Nanaimo.
HE: I don't think there were that many.
MB: When you went out to parties or in the beer parlors, were there ever many people drunk?
HE: No. No, no.
MB: No. Loggers were famous for drinking.
HE: Oh yes, loggers, yes!
MB: I wonder why it was different?
HE: Well they would go in the woods sometimes they would only come out once a month. You see, or sometimes six months. Before they'd get out.
MB: And did you have house parties in those days?
HE: Oh some of them did. Yes, but we were down on the farm and we were out of reach.
MB: Did they use the railway track as a road or sidewalk? Did you walk along the track?
HE: Oh yes, you could walk along the track. That used to be the shortest route. When I'd go into Nanaimo I used to walk from Wellington into Nanaimo.
HE: It just seemed to be the shortest route.
MB: Yes, and nice and flat, you know. Was there much coal dust around?
HE: No, not outside. Round the mine there would be a little, you know, when they were dumping.
MB: You'd be breathing it then.
HE: Yes. But the coal dust never bothered you. Didn't cause any trouble.
MB: You don't have lung trouble from coal?
HE: No, it's the rock. It's the rock dust. The quartz.
MB: Were there many fights or quarrels amongst the miners at all?
HE: No.
MB: And about the funerals, did they walk?
HE: In the early days. They'd have a wagon, or something, that they walked behind.
MB: And did they have an ambulance?
HE: No.
MB: I wonder how they got accident victims into hospital?
HE: By car, or truck, or wagon or whatever way, that was handy.
MB: And before cars where did they tie the horses up and the wagons when they came into town?

HB: Well they used to have hitchin' racks, just like where the meters are. At different places they'd have a post there, with a ring on it that you could tie a horse to. All up and down Commercial street. Specially around the beer parlors and hotels, they'd have a hitchin' rack, to tie up to. And some had bikes in the early days.

MB: And you remember those bikes that had one big wheel in front and a small one behind? Were there any of those?

HB: I remember the odd one, when we were kids. That's goin' back! I don't know who it was, but I can remember seeing those as a kid, this great big one, it'd be a pretty near six feet tall wheel.

And they'd be in the parades May 24th.

MB: Did you enjoy your life? Is there anything you would do differently?

HB: No, I just enjoyed life the best I could, that's all. I've been down to California, and Salt Lake City, and the Yukon, with the Kla-how-ya club. Been down to Reno, San Diego, Yellowstone National Park, and we went into the mines in Montana. Uranium and that. It was great for arthritis.

(End of interview).