Interview with George Bryce

When were you born?

The 24th of August, 1903. I was 24 when I came to Canada. My father was a miner. In Basket. He was what they called a sinker. Sunk shafts, slopes. And for the Scottish (oil companies)?

Did they come out too when you came?

No, my father was out before me. He came out in 1925. Then I came out with the rest of the family. My first job was driving a pony, in the mine. Then, as you grew older, you went on to different jobs, and I went to work with my father. At what we call the face. After that, course I worked there until we came to Canada. I was thirteen and a half years of age when I went to work. I was supposed to be 14 but I told them I was 14 because you couldn't start in the mine before you were 14. (Interviewee's breath is strained, the effects of emphysema). But I was only 13½.

Q: When you came out here then, what did you do?
A: I went to work in Granby. For the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company. And I worked in Granby from 1925 to -- it closed down in 1932. Granby was a mine that (breath) - it had a peculiarity. The seam was pressured that the coal used to blow out. If the miners kept digging in the side, the coal would (wave) in their faces, start spittin' and then it would blow out. When it done that the whole place was suctioned. And there were a few miners caught by staying too long. They got asphyxiated.

So -- that was a guid mine to work in. But ye had to be careful.

About that.

Q: I was told yesterday that they used to say there was a deep lake under Cassidy airport, and the pressure of it used to cause the blowouts at Granby. Do you think that was true?
A: Maybe so. Maybe so. And they wouldn't let them shoot the coal because they had to dig it with a pick. They wouldn't let them drill it and fire shots. It had to all be mined by hand. So it was hard work.

Q: And where did you live?
A: I lived in Granby.

Q: What was life like in those days? What wages did you get?
A: Well, if ye was working it was on contract. And they paid you so much a ton. I just forget the figure now, but it averaged out at about $2 a half ton, so you'd get about $2 a car. But the company wage at that time was about $4.30 for (haulage?) and about $4.63 for miners. They are quite different the wages these days to what they are now.

Q: What time would you have to get there in the morning?
A: 7 o'clock in the morning. 7 to 3. It was all shift work.

Q: So what was it like down the mine? How did you get down?
A: We went down a slope, and that slope was about a mile and a quarter long. Way down.

Q: So you had your special clothes on. How did you dress?

Q: What was the hat like?
A: Pretty hard to say -- just like these hard hats they're wearing now. But with a piece here for your lamp. But before that they were a cloth hat. And the same thing. A piece of leather on that held your lamp.

Q: And what gave light to the lamp?
A: A battery. Which you had on your hip.

Q: I've been told that miners worked by themselves. Was it/pretty lonely job?
A: Yes, well they worked by theirselves at one time. But then there were a change in the Coal Mines Regulations Act. That no man worked himself. Unless there was somebody working close to him. There had to be two men in the place.

Q: And what year would that happen, that law?
A: Well it come in in the twenties.

Q: After you got here then? I suppose before that men would be killed? working by themselves?
A: Yes. I don't think it happened very often, but it did happen, once in a while.

Q: Could you explain what was the smell of it down in the mine? Do you remember?
A: Oh yes. Ye knew ye were down below, because there were damp atmosphere. But then ye had good air. The air traveled round, and there'd be powder smoke from the fired shots. Coal dust and that, of course.

Q: Was it warm, or cold?
A: Around the same temperature winter and summer. That was one thing about it, when ye was down a mine ye didn't know whether it was rainin' blowin' or snowin'.
Q: But if there was anything poisonous in the air, you wouldn't know it, would you? Was there no smell to that?
A: No. There was no smell to gas.
Q: And I've heard that they used canaries...
A: That's right. To detect black damp. That's where there's no air. Carbon dioxide (?) is black damp.
Q: Would they use them every day, the birds?
A: On no. Just when they were inspecting old workings, or ... but old workings were usually blocked off or fenced off. And if there were a fence there saying No Road, you never went through there. The same with a stopping, what they called a stopping. It was built of logs, and just a little slide door on, the same thing.
Q: So that the air in those closed off places didn't travel out to where you were?
A: See, as far as your air circulation was concerned, ye had an intake, and a out-take. And ye had your air shaft, and ye had the fan. The fan is the air come in from your air shaft, and the fan drew the bad air out (his breath is whistling slightly all the time).
Q: Was it connected up to a main seam, that Granby mine? It was a main seam? Where did it extend?
A: It extended from Cassidy right down right to around the water trough when you go to Ladysmith. And up around Haslam farm. Round that way. Back towards Nanaimo river.
Q: And it would have branches going out, I suppose?
A: Oh yes.
Q: Was there only the one opening?
A: Oh no. There were a main slope, and they had airways. And airway on each side os the slope. So there was three.
Q: But there were no other shafts like, say, White Rapids, that touched on that same coal body?
A: Uh, South Wellington did. It was the one it touched on.
Q: How many people worked in the mine when you worked there?
A: Pretty hard to say now. There'd be over 200 men anyhow. Men from Nanaimo, Ladysmith, u around Grandby.
Q: How many years did you work there?
A: I worked from '27 to '32. Till it closed down. Till it finished.
Q: And after that?
A: After that, I went to work in Northfield Mine. No, in between, during the depression, I went to work for a little while up in the Jingle Pot. It wasn't the big Jingle Pot, it was just a small mine that
we were running up there. I worked there for about three or four months. And I went to work at Northfield in 1937.

Q: Well, you had a lot of unemployment in that time.
A: Oh yes, in between.
Q: It was a good thing you weren't married then?
A: Yes.

Q: What was your position in the union?
A: I was the secretary-treasurer. Of the United Mine Workers. Local 7355, Nanaimo. United Mine Workers of America.

Q: When did you become active in the union?
A: When I was fifteen years of age in Scotland.

Q: What prompted you to become active at that age?
A: Well, you know in the old country, the union is the union. And when you start to work, one thing you must do is to join the union. You get to be -- like the older men, you're listening to everything that goes on around, you know what it meant, and you know why it was there. But out here it was a different thing. When I came to Canada, I had it in my pocket. I brought my transfer from the Scottish Miners' Union to Canada. And the first day I went to work I asked a fellow there, who had been to be a Scot, where the union secretary was. He told me to put it back in my pocket and keep my mouth shut, there were no union here! And I just looked at him. And I knew that after I went to work, and Granby wasn't a bad mine, as far as that was concerned.

But, I started back again when they started organizing the United Mine Workers. And they started organizing firstly in 1935, this last local. And we didn't get a contract till 1936. Because it was hard to get any of them to join the union, they were afraid. Because if it was known he was a union man they would have been out. Then they'd been blacklisted, they're stuck. So, we used to, during the time we were organizing, we used to go in little bunches, we'd meet in the bush. We finally got it. And it was a Godsend to the miners of Nanaimo.

Q: Who owned the Granby mine where you worked?
A: The Granby Consolidated Mining & Smelting Company. They had their smelters down in Tacoma, Washington. The coal went from
here down to Tacoma for smelting.

Q: Well then, when you worked in Northfield Mine, this was later on, this was where they got the union.

A: That was when we started, yes. That's when we put our first union button up.

Q: Can you remember what got it going? What conditions, or what grievances or what accidents, or anything like that?

A: Oh, there were a number of things. The men just got to the point where they felt that they should have an organization, and started working on it. Conditions got the union going.

Q: Which were? The conditions were what?

A: Well, such as, you could get laid off for nothing at all. If you lost a day's work, didn't show up for a day's work, if you didn't get fired you got laid off for two weeks, or a holiday. And us younger boys used to say if they don't like the colour of our hair today, or the colour of our eyes we'll get a couple of weeks' holiday. And that's how it used to be.

Q: Who owned that mine?

A: Canadian Collieries.

Q: And who were the head people? In it, can you remember?

A: At that time when Northfield was going, John Hunt was there. The general manager.

Q: So did you get an organizer in from outside, or did you do it yourselves?

A: No, it was done ourselves. One of the principal organizers here was Bill Atkinson, William Atkinson. He organized in Cumberland and he organized here. But Bill belonged to South Wellington. And he got killed in a car accident. We lost a good man when we lost him. He was one of the main ... and of course there were other guys came down from District 13. But that's one thing that you had to be careful with. Any stranger coming in, it went right to the company. And they were what was going on. I guess they felt that there was something going on when these fellows were coming in. But anyhow, we made it! (A chesty coughing frequently interrupts his speech.)

Q: How long did you work in Northfield?

A: I worked in Northfield from 1937 till it closed down in 1942.

Q: What conditions prevailed there? --Because you have emphysema now.

A: It must have had something to do with the mines.

A: Oh yes. The conditions in Northfield mines were different that the conditions in Granby. It was a different seam entirely. The coal could be as low as three feet, or up as high as ten feet. It was a different system of working and getting coal out. In Northfield they used coal-
but cutting machines, not conveyor belts, just the same system as a conveyor belt, but they called them pans. A shute going down into the car. That's the system we had in Northfield. It was very dusty.

Q: Did they at that time have animals in the mine?
A: Oh yes. I was driving at Northfield. I wasn't digging. I was driving a (tote (?) wagon, and a chunk of it and that's where you got the dust.

Q: What I can't figure out, yet, is where the animals were kept underground?
A: They were kept in stables. Underground. Stables, like this room. Built from lumber.

Q: And they were cleaned out every day?
A: Oh yes. There were a stable boss there all the time, looking after them.

Q: Then the water and the manure and that would be run off somewhere, I suppose?
A: No, it was taken up. the shaft. In a coal car.

Q: Then it was kept fairly clean then? Because I can't imagine the smell down there.
A: Oh, it was fairly clean.

Q: What did the mule do?
A: Pulled the cars.

Q: Was there no mechanical means?
A: Oh yes, there were mechanical, but not in all the mine slopes. On the big, long slopes they were mechanical, and other slopes. But there were roads off these slopes, that the mules worked.

Q: So you have the coal, as it came off, in the cars. At what stage was the stone picked out of it the coal?
A: When it got to the wash out (?) in here at Number One. The coal was washed, and graded, and the rock was picked out.

Q: And I have seen in some pictures that there were some pretty young boys there?
A: Yes, but not recently. In the earlier days, yes.

Q: This would be before you came?
A: Yes.

Q: What had you heard about the strikes they had had before you came?
A: I heard quite a bit from my father in law. He was in the 1912, 13, 14 strike. In fact he was in jail for six months. Him and Sam Guthrie. He was with Sam. Sam and my father in law were partners.

Q: What was your father in law's name?
A: James Knowles.
Q: What were your main impressions?
A: There were a lot of things I heard. And when you see what's happenin
in some of these strikes today, it takes you back to what happened in
1912. Why they brought the army in, Bowser's Seventy-two, as they
called it. And of course -- I don't know much about it, but I understan
dy had scabs in Extension, South Wellington, and Cumberland,
land, and there were quite a few of the older fellows that were through
that strike, never forgot the scabs. No.

Q: What caused it, from the beginning?
A: I think it was something to do that began at Cumberland, I understand
then down here. It was on the basis of safety precautions. The men
wanted a gas committee. I believe there were an explosion in Extension
mine, and an explosion up in Cumberland. And this prompted that they
wanted this gas committee, and the company weren't too willing to let
them have it. As far as I understand now, I may not be quite correct, bu
that's what I've been told.

Q: And was this followed by an explosion, then?
A: Not that I know of. I couldn't say, because I wasn't here.
Q: So when was it they went out, then?
Q: It was 1912, I don't know when, but 1912.
Q: I heard quite a bit about it from Mrs. Sam Guthrie... So when you
came, then, there was still bitterness left over?

A: Oh yes! Well, the older fellows. But after the union come back in,
one or two of them, you know, the old fellows, they never forget. But
the younger people, I don't think they... when the United Mine Workers
come in here, that was it. And I'll say it now: It was the best union
that ever hit this island! (laughter).

Q: Now long did it take you to keep struggling before you got it?
A: The union? Well they started in around '35, and the first contract,
I believe, was signed in 1937.
Q: That must have been a victory.
A: It was.
Q: Was there a committee, then, that...
A: Bill Atkinson was one of the boys on there, and the District officers
were down here too. And we just had a bare majority.
Q: Did you have to go and confront the mine owners,?
A: Oh yes. They did. I wasn't on a committee then. They did, yes.
Q: That was pretty early, '35 - '37. That would be the middle of the depression. Times were really tough. What were wages at that time?
A: A driver was getting about $4.00 a day. And a winch got about $1.75. There were over 200 different classifications and different wages.
Q: Do you have records of those things?
A: No.
Q: They'd be in the Mine Workers paper? And you had a mine workers' paper before the United Mine Workers came in, I guess?
A: Yes. That was the We~ Too. That used to criticize all the bosses and everything else.
Q: I wonder if there are any copies of that around?
A: I don't know. I haven't got one. I wish I had.
Q: What did you have to pay for rent in those days?
A: We had our own home.
Q: Most of the mines had their own homes? Built a little house, I guess?
A: Oh yes. Oh, the rent, I don't think, would be very high. About twenty, twenty-five dollars a month.
Q: A good percentage of your wages though, yes.
A: Yes.
Q: And what were the areas that were built up at that time? Was there quite a little town in Extension?
A: Oh yes.
Q: Then this was another company, I guess, when they moved the houses from Wellington up to Ladysmith.
A: Oh yes.
Q: What company was that?
A: That was the Canadian Collieries. (Dunsmuir). I don't know if they moved some from Extension or not. They moved the houses from Granby, out of Granby, some of them from in here, and others went down to Cassidy and what they call Waterloo now.
Q: How did they move them?
A: Oh, they jack 'em up, get a truck under them.
Q: What was your social life like in those days? Did you have the organized dances and socials?
Q: Did they have an organization to do it, or what?
Q: Soccer? Oh yes.
Q: And also the dances...
A: Oh yes. There used to be dances in Harewood Hall, Northfield, Oddfellows Hall, all around.
Q: And the women, they used to get together, I guess?
A: Oh yes.
Q: Were there any disasters, after you came out? Did you see anything about them?
A: Well, I was in one at Northfield. When the water broke in. That would be around 1938-39. But there was nobody lost, that time. We were lucky.
Q: Well what happened? Where were you? What were you doing at the time?
A: I was down the mine, working. And I was driving what they call the south level and the water broke in about 200 feet, 50 feet from where the face was. And it was an overlap in the seam. And here, they were underneath, in Northfield, and a seam that was worked previously was the old Chandler mine. And in these days when the Chandler mine was going, I guess the maps and that weren't quite right. And that's what happened, it broke in to the mine, because there were only about 6 to 8 feet or rock between the two.
Q: What body of water was that?
A: From the Chandler mine.
Q: And where did that water come from? the force of it?
A: I I guess it just filled up. The mine closed down. No pumps going, no nothing.
Q: How did you ever get out?
A: Oh, we got out.
Q: You must have had to swim.
A: No. I was driving a mule, and I got her out too.
Q: You unharnessed her, or whatever. You wouldn't bother with the coal?
A: No! (Laughter). That stayed there!
Q: Was the mine shut down then, for a while?
A: Oh it was shut down then for about two or three weeks. Until they got the water pumped out. But what saved it, the water -- see Northfield mine had been worked before -- it went down into old workings, and took a longer time to come up.
(a long pause...)

but two weeks km after the water breaking in, in Northfield, it broke in in Beban mine, up the Nanaimo Lake road. And there was three men drowned. Two cousins, and another chap. Adam Garr was one of them, and the two (Sheppard) boys. Joe Sheppard, and Nelson Sheppard. They drowned. And one man got out. Senini. (?) Yes, I think it was Tony Senini. Exit He lived in Extension.

Q: It mus have been a slope, then?
A: Yes, it was a slope. Now in Number Ten mine there was an explosion. There was three men killed in that. And that happened on December the 22nd, 1940. Before Christmas. The man killed in that was Jimmie Garrah (?), Christ Mills, and .... Ware.

Q: What happened?
A: Well they were driving a road, what they call a up to up to come up to the surface, to get more ventilation, more air, and the morning shift, oh no, the afternoon shift, fired their shots well, it changed the course of the air, and when the morning shift, came, when those three fellows came on, in a Sunday morning, they went, and there was some loose rock to be loaded, and they loaded the rock, took it down with this hoist, and when put the electric bell on, a spark set it off. And it blew back. If he’d a been around the corner he wouldn’t have been ... he’d have been here and

Q: And that was a Sunday?
A: Yes.

Q: Did they work Sundays too?
A: Well, to get this through. Oh yes, you worked Sundays too. If you wanted to. But the whole mine didn’t work. No, no. Maybe at a job had to be done XXXXX/weekends. I’ll tell you that one thing the United Mine Workers did, for the old miners. They brought in the welfare retirement. They pay right now, it’s $220.00 a month.

Q: What were the conditions?
A: Well, you had to have 20 years working in the mines. You had to be a member of the United Mine Workers. And you had to be 62 years of age. That was John L. Lewis. That come in in 1949. But it wasn’t $220.00 then. It was a hundred dollars then. No, $75.00. Then it went up to $100.00, and it was $100 for a long time. And the reason for this increase now is this strip mining up in Michel.
Q: And what do you think about that?
A: Well, strip mining? I can't see anything wrong with it, providing they bring it back and replant it, which they are doing.
A: There's still a lot of coal up there. What about here, underneath places like Cedar?
A: That's pretty deep. It's been worked all around it. You see, this Number One mine, the coal was mined a way out, past our lighthouse there. A way, that a way, down towards Nanaimo River. And then the Reserve mine is down there too. See there's been mines all around here.
Q: Syd Tickle was telling me about all this coal that was left out there in Cedar district, but he doesn't know whether it's true or not.
A: Yes, there's supposed to be coal out there, in the York estate. (?)
I don't know how it is, how much there is, But they say it's pretty deep.
Q: Did you ever see any of the Dunsmuir's? Or any of their offspring?
A: No.
A: No, they sat back in the castle and had their money.
Q: What about when there was a disaster, or anything like that, I suppose there were certain doctors who came to the fore?
A: Well we had good doctors here. We had no, at that time, we had Giovando, and Dr. Hall, old man ....... There were Allan, Giovando, Dr. Manson, Then there was Mc Neely, Dr. Ball,
Q: And I suppose they made house to house calls?
Q: And you had first-aid teams? They must have had a lot of expertise
A: Yes, this Granby Mine-Rescue team won a lot of prizes around the district. Same with the rescue teams in here, Nanaimo.
Q: I saw a picture of a team in the paper. Tommy Robertson.
He said he worked 27 years in the mines, 20 years in mine rescue work.
Q: So you were married in 1935?
A: Yes.
Q: Have you a family? I've got one daughter, and two sons.
Q: What are the boys doing?
A: One works for the city, and the other one works out on the pump (?)
Q: They didn't have to go into the mines? (laughter)
A: I don't know if I'd have let them go into the mines.
Q: So you knew Sam Guthrie?
A: Oh yes.
A: Oh yes. Well, I knew Sam Guthrie well.
Q: Sam was a miner, wasn't he?
A: Yes, Sam was a miner. My father in law worked with Sam in the Norden mine.
Q: What kind of a man was he?
A: Sam was a good man. He was a man who was there for the working man. Period. He was. I remember when Sam was in the House down there, they was always asking for steady hours. An 8-hour day, a 40-hour week. He wanted a 30 hour week to put the people to work. Off the unemployment rolls. And his idea was good. I agreed with him. Because he said, there could be two shifts working shifts of 30 hours.
Q: He was ahead of his time, then?
A: Oh yes. There was him and old Mr. Winch.
Q: That would be Ernie.
A: Yes. Ernie, and Sam, and old Tom Uphill, from Fernie.
Old Tom was a labor man, too. And these men done a lot of fighting for the working man. The Guthriess lived out Cedar.
Q: So you knew the boys too?
A: Yes. And they got a very good education?
Oh yes.
Do you know what they're doing now?
No I don't. I think there's one down in the States, the last I heard.
Q: They didn't have to go into the mines either. Well, Sam was the MLA, I think.
A: Yes, the MLA for Newcastle Cowichan.
Q: For many many years.
A: During the unemployed days, the unemployed boys were on the march for to Victoria, they come over on the boat, and they stayed overnight in the Miners Hall, and the Ladies Auxiliary of the United Mine Workers put on a dinner for them. It wasn't steaks they had, they had stew, but these boys really enjoyed it. They stayed overnight and then they had a dance for them. So that's how the miners used to treat the boys when they come along here.
Q: What hall did you use for do's?
A: You know where the Chinese restaurant is on Commercial street up above -- it was the old Elite Hall at that time. (Elite) (Ee-light) Hall at that time. Now it's that Chinese
restaurant. That brick building, that was the union hall.
Q: Where did the bricks come from, I wonder.
A: Oh, it was built. It was Yung's Hall (?) actually. Young, he built it. Mr. Young. And the miners, John Bow, owned it, and the miners rented it off him. And at that time we had that hall for forty dollars a month. Two halls, a small hall and a large hall.
A: So San was there to speak to then?
Oh yes. Yes, he used to come around. We had the OCE Club, and all the old timers that Sam knew were in there.
Dad and him were let out of jail at the same time.
How did your father in law describe his stay in jail?
He didn't say too much about it, but he said, jail's jail - ye had to eat what ye got. (laughter) That was in New Westminster.
Q: And they hadn't done anything.
A: No. Just because they was on the executive.
A: Yes, there was some violence, though. I guess they had to put somebody in.
A: The difference between that strike, and the one in '49, there was no pickets or nothing on. Then nobody could get hurt. But mind, if they had started to move coal, then it could have been a different thing entirely. But the company didn't. Because everything was tied up. The railroad and everything else was all under the United Mine Workers agreement. And they couldn't ship coal.
Everything around the mine was under one contract. And that touched on to a lot of the rest of it. We could have had the carpenters, Electricians, engineers, etc., all in one contract.
Q: And it makes for a sort of feeling of solidarity, I'm sure.
Because everybody's depending on the same thing.
A: They had a heck of a time to get the Chinamen. The company didn't want them in. We wanted them in, and they wanted to come, and it was the second contract before we got them in. But we got it. And they was the best union men we had.
Q: How many were there?
A: Oh, quite a few. They were down on the wharf there, there were, oh, I'd say, 50, all told there'd be about 70 or 80 of them.
Q: I suppose they've all died off now?
A: Oh, one or two of them are around yet.
Q: And can you tell us of other miners who we should see?
Q: I mentioned one, Glyn Lewis.
A: We got him at the meeting the other day.
Joe White?
Chief didn't come but he said he would. And Bill Loudon, but they didn't come up.
A" Bill's 83. --Jock Gilmour?
I phoned him up, but he had to go to two funerals lately, and didn't feel like coming just now.