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This is Joy LEACH interviewing Sam CAMERON at Parksville, B.C.

JL: When did you go to Cumberland?

SC: Oh I was about a year old, I guess.

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JL: Maybe.... I'd like to know the year you were born.

SC: 1910.

JL: Was it your father who decided to come to Cumberland?

SC: Yes.

JL: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about that, who your father was and how he came?

SC: He was Sam Cameron too. He come from Ireland.

JL: And did he come back to Cumberland?

SC: Alberta. A fella he met name of Sprucin who was in the mines there, he talked him into comin to Cumberland.

JL: Had your Dad mined before?

SC: Yes in the old country he was shale mining.

JL: You were about a year old eh when you got there. So did your Dad, was your Dad in the mines when they were organizing them. When the union was coming in?

SC: Oh he was out before then. He died before then. That was in the thirties.

JL: Well they started organizing I guess around 1912.

SC: oh you mean the first strike.

JL: Yes

SC: We set a (20) then but around the strike we all got put out of the house so we had to go to Royston then.

JL: They made you get out? Did your Dad ever have stories to tell you about that time?

SC: No. I never heard much from him alive.

JL: Did he work during the strike?

SC: No, no. We lived on mush and beans, for 2½ years.

JL: Did people help each other out then or...?

SC: I guess they did. I wasn't very old at the time, I wouldn't know much about it.

JL: What about...you went down into the mines, eh?

SC: I worked in the mines for 16 years.

JL: How old were you when you went in?

SC: 16 years old.

JL: Had you finished school up in Cumberland?

SC: No in (32).

JL: And finished when you were 16.

SC: Yes.

JL: Did your Dad want you to go into the mines?

SC: I don't know whether he did or not. He never said anything about it.

JL: So you went down what... 19?

SC: 1926.

JL: Were you there when they had some of the explosions?

SC: No. That was after that when I started.

JL: How about your Dad. Was he in any of the mine disasters? Do you remember any?

SC: We were only kids at the time and we stayed at Bevan? We heard about so...

JL: And there wasn't a (43) that hit it?

SC: That was Number 7, it was shut down then.

JL: Can you tell me that the working conditions were fairly reasonable by the time you got in?

SC: No they were terrible. I know how I was, I was up to my waist in water lots of times. It was Number 4 mine when I worked there, one place was on fire and another place with a leg broken. They wouldn't work under those conditions today.

JL: What kind of wages did you get?

SC: Very poor. \$4.22 a day.

JL: Did they have lots of Chinese workers there at the same time.

SC: Yes, around 500, Chinese and Japanese.

JL: And, they were able to work underground?

SC: Yeh. In Number 4, they worked in Number 4 and they worked in Number 5 and 7. Number 7 shut down and they were in Number 4 and then Number 5 - they started a new seam there so the Chinese and Japanese weren't allowed in that mine.

JL: Why was that?

SC: Well there was a - they weren't allowed in mines in Canada at all. The only mine they could work in was Number 4. When it finished that finished them. They weren't allowed in any new mines.

JL: Whose rule was that - company or union?

SC: No, government! The only Chinese in Number 5 when they were there the last time was 1 - he worked in the barn, that was where the old seam was. The new ~~seam~~ <sup>scene</sup>, what they call the middle seam they were working, that was like a what they call the new mines so there were no Chinese allowed in there.

JL: You don't know the reason for what eh?

SC: No. They come in years before that when the Chinese came out the company hired all the Chinese and then they kicked them out and they wouldn't work because they didn't want the Chinese in the mines. Then they turned around and the whitemen they hired them themselves to work for them and a few of them had contracts in the mine and had the Chinese to work for them and paid them very low wages so then the company got wise to that and hired them themselves. They were bickering back and forth for years it was.

JL: They made a lower wage. Did the Japanese make a lower wage than the Chinese?

SC: It was about the same. In the mines around, it was about a dollar a day or something they got.

JL: Where they good miners?

SC: Yeh they were good workers. They only done so much, they didn't work as hard as the white men. The Japanese did, but not the Chinese. They figured they got low wages so they just did so much.

JL: What did the white men think of that?

SC: Well, at first they were supposed to work in places that the whiteman wouldn't work - some of the places were too wet and too dirty so they got the Chinese to work there but eventually they'd work anywhere then.

JL: All the miners used to have nicknames? Did you have a nickname?

SC: No.

JL: I'm finding that I'm running across people called Strappy so and so and ...? Lots of nicknames but you never picked one up eh?

SC: No.

JL: Do you remember anything about Ginger <sup>Gardwin</sup>~~Bergman~~???

SC: No. Yeh, he was - I was only about 7 or 8 years old.

JL: Then, when did the mines start closing down?

SC: Oh after the (105) they started closing the tillers on Number 4. And that went on for quite a few years - it was in the thirties I guess before they actually shut down. The thirties, I'm not quite sure now. I worked in Number 4 for years then I went to Number 5.

JL: And it just slowly decreased?

SC: Yes.

JL: Did you ever work in Number 8?

SC: Just 2 weeks.

JL: Was that the last mine....?

SC: That was the last mine I worked in.

JL: That was the last one operating up there?

SC: No the <sup>table R.</sup> (113) was the last one.

JL: Oh yeh. I want to hear a little bit about the town. In people's memory days they seemed to think that Cumberland was a pretty big place at one time. Can you tell me around - when you were born, 1910 - was that a..?

SC: I guess it was a lively place then. I was born in Scotland and come out here when I was a year old when I went there.

JL: And did you find - I hear reports that the Chinatown was as big as the one in San Francisco.

SC: Oh yeh, it was quite a size. Well even the Chinatown at <sup>Beverly</sup>~~Lenton~~ at Number 7 mine - the Chinamen that worked there - it was quite a sized town there too.

JL: Was it the kind of community that worked together? What can you tell me about Cumberland?

SC: Oh, just an ordinary place the same as Nanaimo.

JL: It's not very big now.

SC: No.

JL: What did you think about the company - were they a very good employer - you worked for who...?

SC: Well, then I didn't think much about it. Well I know, they were an English company now I know they were cheap.

JL: Do you think they skipped on safety?

SC: They couldn't get away with thing they done then now. Nobody would work for them today like they did in them days.

JL: What were the biggest problems Sam, desolation was a ?

SC: Oh the desolation wasn't too bad in <sup>parts of</sup> some mines, in some places it wasn't very good either.

JL: Not the kind of work a working man would do now.

SC: I drove a mule there for years. You drive a big mule in a small place.

JL: Did you ever have - did you find that you had a lot of colds then.

SC: no.

JL: Never had any trouble with your lungs or anything.

- SC: no. Coal is not like hard rock mines. You get coal dust in you, you just cough it right up and it comes out. The hard rock mines - that stuff stays in your lungs.
- JL: They didn't have that kind of trouble with the black lung thing.
- SC: No.
- JL: What about the seams, were they high?
- SC: Some of them were high, in some places, Number 4 was around 7 or 8 feet but the part I worked in was around 16 feet high. That coal is still there yet. It was all on fire around then.
- JL: What do you mean?
- SC: Well, it was burning for years down in the mine where it was burned. They must have shut down the mine before that and flooded that and thought they put it out but they didn't. They went in there again and it broke out again.
- JL: When men were working down there?
- SC: Oh it burnt for years.
- JL: Was it smoky.
- SC: Well, when there was too much smoke they tried to block it off to stop the air from getting in at it and kept moving back all the time so they had to leave it in the end and shut all that part of the mine down.
- JL: Can you tell me any funny stories that happened down there.
- SC: No.
- JL: Nothing was funny, eh?
- SC: No there was nothing funny about it.
- JL: Anybody that stayed in your mind that was a leader at the time?
- SC: No.
- JL: What was your union like?
- SC: It was organized by the communist party. Fella by the name of Jack...from Vancouver, from the Carpenter's Union - he come up and help organize it. Malcolm McLeod was another one that come. It was organized in groups there was like 10 in a group so if anybody got decided to scream to the company about it all they knew was 10. There was about 1200 working there at the time there. The sooner they went from each group one went to another group and there would be 10 of them so I worked with the wife's cousin - me and him went together for years and years - we both belonged to the union but I never told him and he never tell me. You didn't trust nobody. There was a meeting and they had (\$200) there and they had everybody in the union then so.
- JL: When was that?
- SC: About 1934. Anytime they tried to organize a union before that somebody would screw up to the company and they'd fire you. This way they don't. All they knew was each one knew was 10 members. They couldn't know anymore.
- JL: Isn't that a good idea. Was there a strong feelings or did most people want the union?
- SC: Yes they wanted it. They tried for years before that but they could never get organized. And the ones that came up from the ..... to organize them were - they lived on next to nothing - they never got no money for it. Like some of them went to a meetin - there'd be meetings in somebody's basement or they'd be out in the bush and someone would take a couple of loaves of bread for them - another one would maybe be out fishing and take him a couple of salmon. that's all they had to eat on - the one's that were organizing.
- JL: Were they good speakers - these guys?
- SC: Yeh. Some of them, one lad, I forget his name now, he coulda started a revolution if he put his mind to it. He could make everybody listen to him.
- JL: Is that right?

JL: That was quite a struggle though? And Ginger ~~Bergman~~<sup>Goodwin</sup>??? was before that?

SC: Yeh.

JL: Because I've heard the story and I've been up and saw his gravestone and its got this handcrafted thing with a hammer and sickle on it and says, I can't remember the dates right now but says Ginger ~~Bergman~~<sup>Goodwin</sup> and it says shot. Did you ever hear any stories about that.

SC: No I don't think he was a communist at the time - you could call him a socialist. I heard he organized a union in Trail and the C.P.R. was against him, that's why they shot him. They hired this Campbell from Victoria to shoot him.

JL: And then they closed the mines - they had a day strike on that one.

SC: Yeh.

JL: Did you - were you involved in many strikes?

SC: Oh yeh, lots of times.

JL: And no pay, eh?

SC: Sometimes for a week or two and sometimes just one night - they'd close the place up for one night or something. Mostly on a Sunday night it was after the union meeting and go out and picket the mine.

JL: Was the town of Cumberland - did the company and the workers live side by side?

SC: Yeh, the company...

JL: Repeat question?

SC: No, ah, old (name?) he run the mine he come from, I think he come from Africa - his wife was the biggest shareholder in the company so that's why he come out from the old country to run it. He had a house out there up where the school is now.

JL: You know in Nanaimo they have some pretty rugged times.

SC: Things were worse up there then it was in Cumberland.

JL: You thought that eh?

SC: Yeh, the ones that run the mine was worse.

JL: In Nanaimo.

SC: Yeh.

JL: Was it the same company.

SC: No, it was Western Fuel in Nanaimo and Canadian College<sup>ies</sup> in Cumberland. Like Jimmy Quinn now he was manager in Number 5 mine and old Colonel Villiers, he didn't like him going up on the Saturday night and sittin down and havin a beer with them. He didn't like that he figured they shouldn't associate. And Harry Hammel was another one, Manager of Number 4 and he used to do the same thing on Saturday night and drink with the boys but the Colonel didn't think that was right - they shouldn't associate with them.

JL: But he didn't ....I mean these guys did it anyhow?

SC: Yeh.

JL: In the strike that you were involved with did anybody ever strike break and go in and run the mine. That's what causes the real hardship doesn't it? But they were pretty solid?

SC: Nobody went to work. Not like the big strike in 1912. They brought scabs out from the Yugoslavia, they brought from the mainland to work there.

JL: That's when they had the militia involved? Would your Dad have been involved in that?

SC: Yes he was in the first strike. He joined the army cuz the war came up then. After the strike there was only workin' about one day a week or something. So about 1915 he joined the army.

JL: What about poverty. Was there a class system? Did you have people considered themselves upper-class and working class?

SC: They were all very low at the time. There wasn't too much of anything. Oh some of them thought they were a little better off than the rest.

JL: Were there any grand houses?

SC: No.

JL: What about - a sense of the community just a sense of the time. Was the pub a place to socialize? Did the miners gather in the pubs or?

SC: Oh yeh. We all drank a lot of beer.

JL: How many pubs would there be? Do you remember?

SC: There were 7 I think. There was the Union, the Waverly, the Bendome, the Cumberland, and the King George. (342)

JL: Where women allowed in the pub?

SC: There was only 1 or 2 that went in at the time.

JL: Did you ever know of a woman going down in the mine?

SC: The only one I ever heard went near the mine was a nurse, Miss Glody or something was her name. She went out there.

JL: I read about that. She was your (356) for quite a long time then?

SC: Yeh.

JL: Do you remember any families that were effected by the explosions - people who lost?

SC: Robinsons in Bevan I know. Sandy Robinson he got killed there - Ray's father was killed in an explosion.

JL: Was there any kind of compensation? If you lost somebody in the mine did you get any compensation?

SC: Yes. (name-370) got compensation for the kids and after she died she come over and looked after the kids then got remarried and got \$12.50 each for the 2 of them. \$25.00 a month for the regular ones.

JL: What about, which was the strongest influence, the church was a strong influence at that time?

SC: Oh I don't know, I never had anything to do with the church.

JL: What kind of things would you do for entertainment?

SC: Drinkin beer mostly.

JL: The pub was a good place to be.

SC: There were always baseball games and soccer games. Cumberland had a good soccer team Nanaimo had a team they played and South Wellington. There were always soccer teams for a Sunday.

JL: That's when you were a young man.

SC: The Japanese had a good team, a baseball team.

JL: Did they? What kind of activities took place between the 2 towns, between Chinatown and Cumberland, was there any socializing.

SC: no, not much.

JL: They just kept all together separate? There was an Italian community too was there?

SC: Well at one time they were all Italians up there.

JL: Did they work for a different rate?

SC: No, they were the same as the rest. They all got union dues.

JL: Did the Chinese resist the union or did they want it too?

SC: When the union started the Chinese was all out. There was no more Chinese working in the mine there.

JL: Was there a Red Light district up there?

SC: They were around different places. Twenty.

JL: Was there a lot of single miners then?

SC: No not many. Just the Chinese was. There wasn't no Chinese - the Chinese used to come out - there wasn't no Chinese women - there were very few of them.

JL: Were the Chinese blamed for the explosion?

SC: I heard that but - there was supposed to have been caught a match on one. His shoes even blew off so how could they find a match? Down there you never find anything.

JL: Do you think that's what started them getting kicked out.

SC: No. It was just the laws they had in them days. It was the same as a Chinese couldn't get a job as a engineer or boiler - he couldn't work on them.

JL: It was some sort of protection then? Protecting the better jobs for the whiteman?

SC: Yeh. I guess the white man was scared the Chinese was going to take over.

JL: Did you ever used to hear wild stories about Chinatown?

SC: No. As far as I could see they worked. I worked with Chinese in the mine. They just went home and they stopped at a butcher shop and drove home to Chinatown with some pork or something to eat. They lived in little shacks.

JL: What did they do with their money.

SC: Send it back to China - most of them. Now the Chinese can't send it back to China now. They need it all to live on now.

JL: That's true.

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