He's a great old guy, George Edwards. - (few words of conversation before the actual interview begins.)

This is Mike Plecas being interviewed by Myrtle Bergren on May 9, 1979.

Okay, Mike, now when did you start working in the mines? What age would you be?

MP: Oh, you had a good schooling then.

IP: I had a fairly good education.

MP: Where were you born?

IP: I was born in Vancouver.

MP: And how old were you when you came over here?

IP: I was -- well anyhow, my dad worked in Britannia Mines, and anyhow he had to get out of there, and he had to come to a coal mining area, so we moved to Cumberland, and I believe myself I was about -- oh anywhere from five or six years old when we moved to Cumberland. And my dad worked in the coal mines up there, in Number 5 mine, and stuff like that, and then we moved back to South Wellington, and my dad got a job at Morden mine, and he worked there till they went belly up anyhow. And still as far as I'm concerned they hadn't paid any of the coal miners, and stuff like that, and so Dad turned around and got a job in Granby mine. And he worked there right till the day it closed, anyhow. And the reason they closed that mine was they got into this gas territory anyhow, and there was quite a few fellow workers killed there. So they closed that down. The government stepped in there and that was it.

So anyhow, my dad turned around and -- well he was out of a job, and then he went into the cattle business, dealing with cattle and stuff like that. Scotchtown We lived (in Scotchtown) down in South Wellington there and anyhow my dad had been there for quite a while and he -- he got that doggone silicosis anyhow, and that's what -- that's Britannia mine -- killed him. anyhow So anyhow then what was I going to do. Well/my dad passed away, well I thought, I got to get out and do something. To help the -- there was six of us boys and the one girl. Quite a family to look after. So anyhow I -- my auntie was looking after a boarding house in Nanaimo, and all the men working in the coal mine were boarding at her place. So anyhow I come to my auntie one time and I says Do you think that I'd be able to get a job in the mine? Well she says Do you want to go to work? Well I says I got to go to work somewhere. So w she asked one of the he said fellows, you/pretty well known -- and pretty good with the big shots, the bosses, and stuff like that, so naturally he got a job for me.

And I started on the pan walls in Number One mine. And I worked there till the finish of it anyhow.
and that's where I got my miners' certificate and stuff like that. Then they closed that down and then we went to Northfield.

MP: What did you have to do to get your miners' certificate?

MP: Well you'd have to go to -- they'd ask you all these different questions, and what would you do if you walked into a place and you found gas, and how much powder are you supposed to carry with you, and who's supposed to fire the shots, and are you supposed to fire them shots? No. It's up to the fire boss, he does all that. But you can tamp up your powder and stuff the powder in your hole, and then you got the little sandbag, you put that in, you use a stick to tamp it -- you daren't use a -- you can use a copper bar -- in case that sets the explosion off, you see. So you got to be doggone careful.

MP: The copper won't, eh?

MP: The copper won't. No. We have a long bar, with a piece of copper on the end of it. And naturally you're going to use it carefully. You're not going to bang it away. Because, electric blasting caps, and anything is liable to set them off. But that -- the whole idea was --

MP: So that's the only metal they would allow then?

MP: Oh yes. Well I've never used it. I used mostly wood. I used to go in the bush and cut myself a stick, and bring that down with me. I figured that was the safest thing to do. I wasn't going to trust any copper anyhow. This stick is the real ideal thing.

MP: Usually the young fellows started on the winch or something.

MP: Yes, but I never did. I started to work on the pan walls, and I was what they call a mucker. After the coal cutting machine would have cut all this, and all that junk would have -- then we had to (gob?) all this rock -- throw it in what we called a gob. And then we'd keep movin' this up, keep pullin' these pans out, and put them back in for the pan men to come along, and connect them back up again.

MP: But how high was the coal there? in Number One?

MP: Oh, the coal there, it was fairly high, it was about 3½ feet, 4 feet. It was in nice condition. A good solid roof, good condition to work in, you wasn't scared of any darn thing. You hadda be careful.

MP: You'd have to be bending down.

MP: You'd have to be bending down.

MP: Oh yes, you were mostly on your hands and knees. Sometimes you'd get up and you were kind of easy on yourself.

MP: And at that time, could you go through to Protection?

MP: Yes, that's the way we used to go. We used to go from Nanaimo, and we would go over on the We Too, they called it. And we used to go across to Protection shaft, and go down, and we'd walk down into where we used to work. Now I just forget the name of the hill anyhow, but it was quite a ways to
and we had to go through --

wall, and there was just enough room for the men to walk through. More or less I'd call it an airway, I guess that's what it really was. I really wasn't that much interested in coal mining at that time. I think that's what it was, and that's what we used to do. We'd walk down in through this old road and down to where we worked.

MB: And eventually you could maybe go right through, could you? from Number One to --

MP: Oh yes, you could. But then they had the electric motor then, there were very few that ever walked along there. That's why they used to take us across from Nanaimo to Protection Island, and we would go down a shaft there and we walked down in, because it was safer there than actually if you walked along from Number One. To where we used to work. They had the electric cable, and that was 500 volts. Well if you happened to touch that, that was curtains for you.

MB: Who was it, Daisy Waugh --

MP: Daisy Waugh got killed, yes. He got killed -- I'll never forget that either. I was working at Hill 60 at the time there, and I believe it was on New Years Eve. And there was going to be a great time in Nanaimo, the dance, and stuff like that. And there were three of us working with -- Albert Bradshaw, and Pete Kemp. I was working with them. And anyhow, sure, you could see the boys, they were walking out, toward Number One. You see, and anyhow, I could see these lights going down by, and anyhow there was somebody comin' on by was waving a light, you know. I just figure on.

Well, come on, let's go, eh? So anyhow I says to Pete -- Kemp he was a heck of a good man too, real good man. He was first aid man, and I says Pete, I says, let's pack up and let's go, eh? So anyhow, in the meantime, was I believe it was Daisy anyhow, but where he got killed there, there was a puddle of water. And that's where he stood. If he'd a been (leaning?) more on the dry, maybe it might have not -- it might have given him a shock all right, but it might have not killed him.

Well anyhow, I could see there was something going on, and I says to Pete, I don't know, there's something funny going on there. I sais because I noticed this light waving, and all of a sudden whoof! That was it. Oh, Pete says, I don't know. So I says, well, you better go yes, and have a look. /There was poor Daisy, he was dead.

There was water, and he happened to turn, and God only knows what happened, but I guess he turned, he hit the -- because there was a mark, alongside of his temple there, you know. Well you see, when he got in contact, sure, it sort of burnt him. Well, 500 volts. So that was it.
MB: Well then this time that you were in this small area there, where you had a feeling that something was going to happen --

MP: Well that was then -- okay, then when Number One closed, then they opened up Northfield, you see. So anyhow we got working Northfield mine, and some of the walls we had there when they first opened up, it was good. It was say three feet, three and a half feet, so on. And then sure, we kept going, and then we got into this lower seam. I believe there was only 16 inches. We had 16 inch posts, with a 2 inch lagging on top. That brought it to 18 inches. And that's what we worked in. And it was wet. Filthy, dirty, stink, there was a smell, you know. It was sort of sulphur, and every other doggone -- I believe myself that's what it was, anyhow. You know I wasn't too familiar with it but I had an idea that's what was causing it, because it was really rotten there.

MB: So then you had this feeling that something was going to happen?

MP: So anyhow, like I was telling you before, sure, you got these cogs and everything built, and timber and everything else, but there's a lot of weight there, you know, and by God, I could hear this -- and I knew right away, as soon as I could hear this bumping and stuff like that, I knew there was something gonna take place. So then I told my brother and stuff like -- and the other fellows, then they relayed the message from one to the other. What Mike said, and stuff like that. And I guess they said, Well we better get to heck out of here.

And we got out, we walked off the pan wall, we come down on the loading and we watched to see what was going on. And down it come! And broke right off right up at the face! We call the face of the coal, that's where it broke off.

MB: How far apart were the timber there?

MP: Well, the timbers -- like the posts and stuff that we put up, they are four feet apart. That's regulations. And the ax cogs I'd say were oh, every thirty forty feet. Which I figured it was wrong, they should have had them a little closer, because the roof was really rotten. It was rotten. That roof was rotten. There was - oh, I'd call a sort of a shale. And that would come off, and if you didn't try and support that, try and hold it somehow, and if that ever came -- and then above that the roof shale was good. It was solid. Ax You could hit it, as soon as you hit it with a pick, ping! you could hear that sort of a bell sound.

But like I say there was about two feet of shale stuff that use to --
This is what I hear about the coal here, it went in layers, with dirt in between. So you never knew if you were going to be in a little space --

MP: That's right. So anyhow we worked there and then, sure, it got so dangerous, and then in the meantime, when the water broke in -- am I going ahead of myself or --

RE: No, no.

MP: So anyhow, where the water was -- where we was working, we were changing shifts, see. Naturally we all come down to where we were supposed to go to our working places. Now we got on the walls, and I used to look after the panning and stuff like that, and I used to tighten all the jacks, to make sure all the pan engines (?) wasn't going to move. If that one of those got a whack and we'd have one heck of a time to try and get a this cool on. So I used to tighten up those jacks up there, four jacks, on this panning (?) -- I'd tighten them all up, and anyhow in the meantime and while I was doing that, I happened to look up the wall, and I could see something a way up there, like somebody was waving a light, you see. So I thought well my God, I wonder what is happening. So anyhow I hollered up the wall from one to the other, like I hollered to my brother and he hollered to the next fellow, and that went up the -- and here was the superintendent on top of the wall there, come on fellows, get out! And I could tell then, there was something wrong. Because the air wasn't working right. Where the air should come down the wall, it was reversing itself. Well naturally the force of the water was causing that dam thing. So anyhow, well okay. We all left everything the way it was, and away we goes. Boy oh boy, $------ says to us, he says, 'You've got to watch what you're doing, there's an awful lot of water coming, and you gotta try and get up the best way you can. Try and hang on to one another, and we'll all march up there. So all right. We got up, and my God, it was quite a force. Quite a force. So anyhow we walked up. In the meantime, all the horses and the mules, well they was down underground too, well they had to be taken out first. Animals out first, and then the men to follow. (laugh)

MP: Animals were more important than the men.

RE: They'll

MP: Oh yes! /Always/look after the animals! But I think there is a ruling to that effect that the animals have to -- we can't let them drown, eh? We got them to get them out safe.
So anyhow, I think, I'm not quite so sure, but I think the ruling is, animals first and men after.

MB: What had broken in?

MP: Now okay. It's a good job it happened on a change of shift. Now I was tellin you, they're (rotten), and they was looking for this water. They knew the water was there. But at that time, the blueprints of the old workings were wrong, and they didn't know. They figured the water was ahead of 'em -- the water was above 'em. See. So anyhow they turned around, and I think it was either 19 or 21 shots to be fired. The morning shift, they turned around and drilled the holes fired the shot, the afternoon shift come and cleaned all the stuff out, see. So anyhow, they did all that on the morning shift, and then the afternoon shift, the change of shift, we come back down into our places where we're supposed to work, when this -- I guess it wasn't too far away -- kept getting weaker and weaker and weaker, and out she come. An enormous lot of water there. Talk about a good job! I'll never forget that!

So anyhow like I say, we come back up to the shaft, and the horses, and mules they had gone already. Then they start taking the men, 9 men to a cage. That's all that was allowed on them cages. Nine men to a cage. And they kept hoisting up and hoisting up, and we kept waiting, and if there was any prayers said, we said them that time! We were praying to God nothing would happen to the hoist.

MB: How many feet high was the shaft?

MP: Well, I'm not quite sure, but I think it was 290 feet.

MB: It would seem forever to you to wait.

MP: Oh yes. It took quite a while. But anyhow, I kept praying that God would only save us, and (chuckle) don't let us drown down there.

MB: Where was this water at the time?

MP: The water was going still down into the old workings, you see. Thank God for that. But anyhow, sure, it didn't take long for that water to fill in. And it started backing up towards the shaft, you see. And my God, it kept getting higher and higher and higher. And there we were. So anyhow, I think it was on the last cage, there was six of us left.

MB: Where was the water up to?

MP: It was up to here already on me, you see. (points to his neck.)

MB: Up to your neck.

MP: Sure! So I thought Boy, now, now we've really had it! If anything should go wrong, with that (cleat?) -- that's it. Another thing I should've mentioned this before. What we should've done, but then we was kind of
scared. We could have went to the air shaft, but no, with all this change of air and everything else, God only knows if any accumulation of gas or anything else in there, and the only way you got to climb up these ladders to get out. (clear?)

You never know. If that were clean, if it would work the way it was supposed to work, sure, that would be fine. But okay, fine, we're safe. But with all this water and stuff like that, everything was just reversed, eh? So there Still you are. /xxx you couldn't go up there. Sure, you; reliable to gash up start going up there and bang! that's it. Kill you right there, eh?

So anyhow, like I say, there was six of us. Got on this cage.

HQ: The last six!

FP: Yeah! The last six! I remember getting on that cage, and boy oh boy!

And I thought well anyhow. Sure, as we got on the cage, the button had to let the engineer know. Boy! I couldn't touch that button quick enough! Come on, Bud! Get 'er goin'! (laughter). Yeah, that was the history about the Northfield mine.

Now, you mentioned before about the cage. Now, I don't really know what happened. I'm not quite sure whether I was on that or not. But it sort of rings a bell. I might have been on that. But what happened there, they have the guides, /xxx where this cage comes down, eh? There's this /xxx -- see. Well, one of them happen /xx to splinter or break or some doggone thing (punches one hand into palm of other) that's it. Soon as it hit that, these dogs on there, they jam right into this timber, you see. Thank God they did have that safety device. Anyhow, as soon as the engineer, sure, he knew. When he was lookin' at his drum, eh, he could see the cable's not tight. It's goin' all over his drum. So he knew right away there was something wrong. He said My God, I don't know whether the cable broke, or whether the cage is jammed in there some way. So anyway he turned around and he straightened the cable all out, and put it where it was supposed to be, and just slowly moved it back, and released the and brought her back up. The same nine men were still standin' on the cage, didn't know what the heck happening. When you look there used to be a little opening above the cage where you could see and you -- they could see the rope was all coiling and bumping and wondering what the sam hell's goin' on!

HQ: And the weight of the rope would make it heavier too, on the cage!

FP: Sure, sure, sure! But like I say, thank God they had those dogs on /xxx there, that safety device, and if anything goes wrong, this 'd jam right into the timber, you see. And you can't go anywhere, you see.

EB: They'd be gone.
MP: Oh yes sure! Because that's what happened at Protection one time. That was before my time. The cage broke. The cable broke and down went the men. That was it. That was before my time. But just what the old timers tell me about it. What really happened it was just rotten rope. One thing I can say about, they were safety minded, I got to give them that. They were safety minded. That rope had to be checked every day. Because naturally it's not only hauling men, it's hauling coal, and that's what happened at Protection one time.

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MB: Because their lives were at stake too.

MP: Sure sure! Because they were on it, that's the only way they can go down. They had to go down, so they depended on that too, eh? And like I say, any least little flaw in that cable or anything like that, it was just looked into. But what happened that day, I don't know whether they ever did find out. What really happened that day, I think it was six by six.

MB: It was a narrow escape anyway.

MP: Like I say, if that safety device hadn't of worked down there, the same thing would have happened as happened at Protection. Down you go, and that's it.

MB: I guess they didn't have one at Protection.

MP: They didn't have at that time. But time went on, and the fellows looked after that, they're experimenting and trying to find out now, in case if anything did go wrong, how could we avoid it?

MB: Well Northfield mine, the conditions were not very good then?

MP: The Northfield mine, conditions were really rotten! That's what I can say about it. They were rotten! The working conditions were rotten, the safety, as far as safety -- it wasn't the company's fault to blame for that, because naturally the conditions of the roof and stuff like that was absolutely rotten. It was dangerous. It was lucky that we ever survived. I thank God, and many a time I said if we can only get out of here, I'll never go back into that kind of work -- I wouldn't have, either! If I had to go back to that kind of work -- never! Never go back!

MB: It went under Diver's Lake?

MP: Ya, we was under Diver's Lake. We were coming down towards Nanaimo Lake. The one road was going up towards the north end, and the other road was going and that's where we were when the water broke in. Towards Diver Lake, see.
MB: Did they threaten to fire you?

HP: No, nobody got hurt, or killed. But I guess if they were there that long without this organization, they could do whatever the sam hell they figured we'd just rub it into them and give it to 'em and all this sort of stuff. They didn't seem to realize. They were way back from England. They brought that over, and they still have the same ideas! And that's the same trouble they're having in England now! The coal mining system they have back there is rotten!
No!

BP: That's one thing they never did. No. He never -- no! But the things that he said, and the way he said them, but we were thick skinned, and we didn't budge that easy. Just like I say we took it with a grain of salt when we seen where it was coming from. Well because we knew, sure, naturally they don't like the idea of having a union or something. Naturally, we know that! But sure, wait we're going to show them in the long run it was for their benefit too and also for us. We're all going to profit by it.

BP: I had heard that before, if anybody dared to be union minded that they would just fire you.

BP: Oh sure! That was before, that they did have a union. But it was under cover. But they used to send these doggone stool pigeons out and check everything out, to see who these men were. And they'd report back to the superintendent and the pit bosses and all this sort of thing. Naturally they'd always wait look to see where they could get an opening where they could throw him out. That's what happens. That's the way they worked.

BP: And how did your mother feel about it?

BP: Well, (laugh) when we come home we told her, we told her Mum, we've joined the union. Oh my God! she says, What's going to happen now, she says, if you two boys happen to lose your jobs, what are we going to do? I says Mum, I says, how we going to lose our jobs? We've done nothing wrong! And if they're going to fire anybody they've got to fire the whole darn shooting match! So they got to fire us all! I said, different thing if it wasn't a majority of the men, but we all joined. We knew what was, what the conditions were, and we want to get these conditions to suit us, to make it safer for us. But I'm darned if I know, I used to come home there, worry my head, Oh my God. I gotta go back there tomorrow morning again. Huh! I don't know whether I'm going to make it or not! I don't know whether we're going to make it, we might get out of there and we might not! That was always on your mind. Because you was working in such a low place, and that's the way you always thought. --

Is God protecting us? Is God with us? Which he was with us, oh yes! I'm not what you call a religious fellow, but I believe, and that's the way I felt about it. He had to be with us, or we'd a been -- well, if God wasn't with us, we'd a been drowned whin that water broke in. Just like a bunch a maizxmaizx rats!

BP: In the bowels of the earth, down there, crawling in like worms...

BP: Sure! Sure! Sure! That's what we were, the poor fellows there. it!

My God, I'll tell you. I'll never forget! I'll never forget it as long as I live! The low workings, the conditions, ho! It was something, really, out of this world! Something that I'll never forget!
Also, when the war was on, how did they talk to you about the union?

KP: Well, what the man said to us, he'd say, You're not going to win the war that way, lad. You can't have that! he says. I says Listen, we're going to win the war! Regardless, whether we belong to the union or not. We're still - that's our object, to get this coal out, and we're going to do it! Union organization, or no union, that's what we're here for, and that's what we're going to do. And we're going to give you a fair day's work, we're going to make sure of that, because that's for industry. That's for war ammunitions and stuff like that. This was real good steam coal, and it had to be mined for that purpose. And that's what we was there for.

NB: And he thought that and he tried to say that because you were joining the union that you were sluffing.

KP: Sure, he thought we were sluffing. We sat down and told him No, we're not going to sluff, because if we're going to sluff then we're going to lose everything. And I said we're not here for that purpose. We're not going to lose, we're going to win! So that was it. And finally they turned around and come down to brass tacks and they realized what we were doing and we were doing it in a proper manner, real good men, good citizens, democratic, that's what we had in the back of our minds, democracy, and that's what we had it with us. And we still have it right today. That's what we believe in, democracy.

So I hope that's going to interest the younger generation. I hope it's going to open their eyes and ears, and to what I said here, is the honest truth. I've had to struggle. And we did struggle. We struggled worse than any human being who did. In Northfield mine, we struggled, really! We've had to.

XX And us coal miners, we really made up our mind that we were going to do our best, in the best possible way to do our work, in a safe and orderly manner, keep everything going the way it's supposed to go, union or no union, we were still there for that purpose. And we kept our word, and we stuck with it. And we gained in the long run. We weren't only thinking about us ourselves. We were thinking about the whole community.

KP: (End of tape)