

Page 1

RALPH DEANDREA & TONY LARGO Tape #1034

Interviewer: Steve Becker - 1977

What years did you work in the mines? Oh, from about 1910 to about - I don't know - 40 years. You worked from about 1910 to past '45, didn't you? Yeah. 1910 - I worked in 1905.

What hours did you work in the mines? The first hours was eight hours. Eight hours a day; did you ever work 10 hours? Oh, no. That just came in.

What kind of equipment did you use? Well, I had an oil lamp. They used coaloil in it.

Well you drove mules, didn't you? You was a mule driver first.

I was a mule driver first.

And you loaded coal, didn't you mine coal?

Yeah.

How did you load the coal? By hand. With a pick and a shovel. And a strong back. 60¢ a ton.

Who supplied your shovels and cart and stuff? You supplied that yourself. The company furnished the timber and the pit cars and the rails. Outside of that, everything else you furnished yourself.

You had to buy powder, fuse and all your hand tools.

Where did you guys live in the company houses? No. Some people did, but most of them lived - they had their own homes. He lived in the town of Superior and I lived in the town of Louisville.

How were you paid by the company stamps or cash? Well, they had what they call - what did they call that - they was stamps was what you got (scrip) - some stamps and some cash.

I never did get paid in stamps; I always got cash where I worked. I started in 1917 and I worked until about 1948.

Where did you shop - in the company stores or elsewhere? In the summer we shopped at the company store because we didn't have no money but in the winter, we'd kind of step out - is that right?

Yeah, in the summertime, I used to shop at the company store 'cause you got credit. And you owed the company the rest of the winter so - you know the song ab out "Ten Ton" - well - he "Owed His Soul To The Company Store".

What kind of clothing did you wear? Overalls. You got dirty. You had to change them every night and take a bath.

One thing, they furnished us a bathhouse, anyway, didn't they? But we paid for that too - I think it was 50¢ or 75¢ a month - or a pay - whatever it was, remember?

Well, I don't remember exactly, but we paid for it anyway for the use of the washhouse.

What mines did you work in? Three different mines - four - four different mines. The Industrial, Columbine, Matchless and Mitchell - that's Monarch #1. And I worked at Monarch #2.

How deep was the mine, on the average? About 250 feet.  
That's the deepest? Yeah, it was around 250.

You worked in the Highway, didn't you? Yeah. Well, that one was over 300 feet. Yes sir.

Then there was the Gorham. The Gorham was a slope mine - there wasn't no shaft - just a slope in the hill there.

How was the coal loosened? Did you use dynamite or picks or what? When you first started - long, long ago, they'd mine it with a pick and then they shot it down. Later on, they got machines and the machines undercut the coal. They undercut the coal and then they shot it down. That made mining a little bit easier.

How did you bring the coal to the surface? Elevator.

How did you load it on to the elevator? With pit cars.

Were the rails in the elevator? You roll it off the rails in the mine onto the elevator? Yeah, you had rails all over the mine there - even where you loaded the coal, you had to lay what they called leg tracks so they could get the cars right close to where the coal was at, see. They got the cars loaded and then they'd either have a mule or a motor to pull them out to where they could haul them to the bottom. The bottom was the bottom of the shaft, see. From there on, they had track - it would run them on to the cage - they'd run them on to the cage - that's the elevator. Then they'd hoist them up and they'd dump them.

Wouldn't it be easier to load them at whatever level you're at instead of taking it to the bottom and then up?

You had to take them to the bottom to get them up on top. There's only one shaft so you had to take them up to the shaft. At the shaft, they had a hoist and the hoist went straight up.

Didn't they stop at different floors like in department buildings? Yeah, they could but most of the time they only had one floor. One vein, see.

How were the mules used? The mules were used to pull the carts around - empties and loaded ones. Was that all they were used for? Well, they drug them heavy cars around for 8 to 10 hours a day.

Where were they kept, underground? Underground in the stable. They had underground stables. And sometimes, they kept them down there for two or three years at a time. They never seen daylight for two or three years at a time.

What kind of memories do you have about the mines? Pleasant or unpleasant? Terrible. Terrible.

What kind of what?

Memories - what do you remember best about the mines, about the good times down there? The only good thing about the mines was in the wintertime, you got out of the cold weather. Down there there wasn't no snow. Right? But you always got plenty of hard work. Back achin' work.

How many mines were there in this area? Oh, I couldn't tell you, there must have been - there was Louisville and Lafayette besides Frederick and over there - there must have been 40 or 50 mines, right? Besides Marshall - there was mines at Marshall too.

Erie is the oldest mining camp in the state.

You're wrong - well, not in the state - it might be around this northern field. Trinidad had mines down there in 1870 or something like that - 1880. I know what you mean - I shouldn't a said nothin' but Trinidad and Walsenburg - they're the oldest coal camps in the state.

What kind of conditions were there in the mines? Terrible. What kind of hazards? Hazards - danger from explosions - blowed them to kingdom come - and a lot of dust down there too. How could the explosions happen? Gas. Gas and coal dust. It would take a flame or spark to set off the gas. An accumulation of gas and an accumulation of coal dust and that was just like lightin' a furnace. And then pretty soon

if you got a spark, why, with the gas, it would set that off and pretty soon the gas was - just like a shotgun shell or some kind of a shell explodin'. Poof - and that was it. A big fire and big flames all over. I seen a - I wasn't in no explosions but I seen gas lit and stuff like that but I never was in.

A lot of gas - a lot of explosions was caused by - they had these electric motors - and -.

Yeah, they used to arc off the trolley wheels but most of the explosions was caused by either sparks or miners' lamps. The flames in your lamps. That's when they went from oil lamps to carbide lamps and then they went from carbide to electric lights. After they got electric lights, there wasn't so many - see it got more safe with the electric lights because there was no more flames.

What other kinds of hazards were there? There was always the danger of a loose top. And loose coal on the face. They'd shoot it and if it didn't all fall over, it would hang in there and it would come down and a lot of men would get their legs broke and a lot of men got their back broke and a lot of men got killed by loose top - loose rock. And that was mostly because of bad timber too - they was careless with their timber. All they wanted to do was - if they didn't put coal in the car why you didn't get no money. They paid you for whatever coal you loaded out of the mine and put on top - what they weighed over the scales - that's the way you made your wages.

About how much coal did each car carry in weight? Well, it depended on the size of the car, but most of them were over a ton - say 2200 - 2500 pounds. If you loaded a car that weighed 2500 pounds of coal in there - the company would steal 700 or 800 pounds. That's the truth. So then after a while - the company had a man they called the weigh boss. He used to weigh the coal for the company and after a while when they got union around there, they were able to get a check weighman up there. The check weighman represented the miners so he was up there and they was checkin' on each other to see that nobody cheated on each other. Things got a little bit better that way when they got the check weighman.

How old were you when you worked in the mines? I was 11.

How old were you? I was 15 when I started.

I walked three miles to work every morning and back. And you had to be there to work on time. You didn't get paid no travelin' time.

Page 5

RALPH DEANDREA & TONY LARGO Tape #1034

When was workin' time? 7:30 in the morning. We left Superior at 5:00 in the morning - 6:00 and we started walkin' until we got to the mine to go down and at 4:00, you got out after eight hours, you walked home.

If you could afford a horse, you coulda bought a horse, but there was no money.

If you had a horse, you was rich in them days.