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AB - TAPE ONE SIDE ONE

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Q. You can start when you want, you know. You started when you were 14 years old?

AB. Yes, 14, when I left school.

Q. No. 26, as a pony driver?

AB. As a pony driver, yes.

Q. Just carry on from there, then.

AB. It was quite - just an ordinary boy's job, you looked forward to it when you left school, if....you'd nothing else in the area but shale mining, and that was the most interesting job we found, dealing with a pony. We used to go walking along, and if we were on the nightshift we used to pop into farmer's fields and steal his turnips or if there was somebody growing nice carrots in their gardens, we used to pop over and.....but that was for the ponies, pit ponies. As I say it became a very interesting job because.....

Q. In what sense?

AB. You were dealing with a dumb animal and you had to look after it, and you certainly did have to do that, stables had to be spotless, the stables you know where you put them in, and you had to always go down early in the morning first, before the men, brush and curry comb them, take them out to where they were pulling the tugs, backwards and forwards, and then bring him home, maybe half an hour early, same again, curry comb them, feed them, make sure that everything was ok.

Q. Can you remember who the horse driver was?

AB. Yes, it was a chap by the name of Aitken, he came from Oakbank Cottages, auld Jock Aitken we called him. He was quite a very efficient man as far as the horses was concerned too, the ponies, he looked after them fairly well, I didn't ever see anybody, you know, that was unkind, except on an odd occasion when you got one and they were a wee bit squeamish at going out.

Q. From there what did you do, how long were you a pony driver?

AB. Oh I would say two years, 2 years pony driving, and then you just gradually worked your way up. As your body got built up and you got stronger, they put you on to heavier jobs, you know, and.....

Q. So it was a deliberate tactic of the Company to do this first?

AB. Oh yes, oh yes. Oh aye, they wouldn't like whenever you left school you didn't leave the pit bottom for a year, that's where all the lights were. And you didn't require a pit lamp or anything and you took the tubs off as they came down from the surface and loading on the full tubs to go up to the surface. That's.... and you spent all.....and there was quite a few different jobs around the pit bottom, you know the pit pony would take the empty tubs into the different districts, and bring out the full loads to the pit bottom and then you started and you served that sort of apprenticeship at the pit bottom and you were sent out into the pit and then you were sent out to the workings to do what we called haulage jobs, either driving an engine or... you'll have heard of what was known as the back balance braes?

Q. No.

AB. Well, that is the weight of say 3 or 4 tubs, full tubs going down, drew the empty tubs up, didn't require any engine, and it was controlled by a brake, just a wheel, with a rope round it about three times, and it came down, the boy just stood at the top of the brae, and worked this brake, this brake which was round the wheel. It brought them down. That was.....

Q. Was that what they called, you called it a back balance, was that what they called a cousy brae?

AB. A cuddy.

Q. A cuddy brae?

AB. That was worked on a different principle. That was worked on a different

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principle. I could draw that if you don't understand it.

Q. Yes, I see what you mean, there are three empties being pulled out, that is for balance?

AB. Yes, that is the balance, we called it a cousy, a cousy brae, but what you're talking about is a cuddy.

Q. A cuddy?

AB. Aye, that was a dumb hutch which was filled up with any kind of material to load it and it worked with a double purpose wheel, fixed to the stoop side in the shale up at the top and the wheel. The rock came off that pin and it came down round the wheel on the cuddy, and up round another wheel at the top, and whenever the miners drawer filled the hutch, he put his rope in his hutch and shoved it over, and the cuddy came up, the loaded cuddy came up and balanced the.....

Q. I see, yes.

AB. That's what you would call the mechanics of.....some form of.....

Q. That's a pulley system, isn't it?

AB. A pulley system, yes, it's quite easy to draw it on a bit of paper. And the cuddy only travelled half the distance you see, because it had only a...it had a double rope.

Q. Oh I see.

AB. It only - supposing the full hutch had to travel downhill, 200 ft, the cuddy approximately only came up 50 feet because it had this double pulley. It's hard for somebody.....

Q. Yes, you would have to see it working perhaps to understand it better. So that was a job for the haulage boys?

AB. Haulage boys, yes, driving engines and then of course your main aim in life if you developed these muscles was to get on to the drawing, filling and drawing, because that's where the week's money was made, and then ultimately – the ultimate calling was to be a faceman. So I would say that I consider that I went through all seasons of shale mining except one, in that I never drove

a winding engine, you know, the one up at the top, a, very important job, that.

Q. Why didn't you do that?

AB. Well, I just didn't ever get up that way.

Q. I see.

AB. Used to often go at the weekends when there was nobody - nobody winding it, you know, no men going up and down, I used to go in and the engine driver used to give me a shot. I never was on that job. You know, I was always an active man, I did not like to sit.

Q. Yes, you'd think it would be a boring job.

AB. Yes.

Q. So how long were you in 26, did you become a, drawer in 26 Polbeth?

AB. Yes, that was my first job, on the drawing, in 26 shale mine.

Q. And who did you work with?

AB. A chap called Geordie Campbell, he comes from....I don't know if he's still alive yet or not....he came from - he lives - he used to stay at Mossend, West Calder, that's what it's called, he moved to Bellsquarry. He was my first faceman. And I don't know if he's still alive yet or not.

Q. We could find out.

AB. Aye, Geordie Campbell. He was better known as the "Sarge", he was an Army man, a big tall man, walked straight. Aye, that was my first job as a miner's drawer - six - I think I wouldn't have been much more than 17 years of age.

Q. Do you remember the quantity of shale or hutches?

AB. Oh yes, oh aye, it would be about - anything from 15 to 20 hutches a day, depending on the length you see we had to draw the - what we call, draw the hutch to the gathering point.

Q. How much weight were the hutches, were they the full 22 cwts?

AB. Well, the empty hutch tared about 5 - 6 cwt., and when the full load went over the weights it would be about 25 cwt. You'd to take that 6 or 7 cwt. off and that was the amount of shale you filled. It would be about a ton.

Q. Now was that the hutch, what they called set up, you set it on the sides?

AB. Set on the sides, yes. That was, the miner got greedy, he got greedy, he wanted to put away more weight on one hutch than probably two, like a coal hutch, which was its full level at the top, because it was set up the sides to get more weight on.

Q. You can't blame them when they were getting tonnage wages, you need to be.....

AB. Are you interested to see my first accident?

Q. Oh, tell me about it.

AB. See that mark?

Q. That's a nasty scar.

AB. Well, that was a full hutch of shale ran over that leg.

Q. How did you do that?

AB. My foot stuck in what is called a frog of a platform, a platform that – if you want a hutch to go that way, you use this platform, and it goes that way - move the points, you go straight. You'd got a right hand platform and a left hand platform, it's got a "V" like that, for taking the load round that way, or for coming straight, and I got the heel of my boot stuck in the nick.

Q. And how long were you off with that?

AB. Believe it or not I was only off for seven weeks, I didn't break any of the two bones in there.

Q. Was it a, full or empty hutch?

AB. Full.

Q. A full hutch?

AB. Full, a ton and a half.

Q. Did you get compensation for that?

AB. Oh well, while I was off work. You don't get what they're getting now. 37 years.

Q. Oh, no!...Were you a drawer when this happened, or haulage?

AB. No, I was an oversman then.

Q. An oversman.

AB. Again, the lads that had been using these two particular roadways were having trouble with their tubs going off the road, de-railing and I was - my foot - and I was measuring round about, this tub was on its way up and I just went to step to the side and the tub was on top of me before I knew where I was. I'd to tear the heel off my boot to get it out. Too late, the tub was up and over me.

Q. Dangerous things, these hutches.

AB. Oh aye, you'd to be very careful how you went about with them.

Q. I'll tell you what always amazes me, yo u know you have the snibbles as a brake, could they not have devised a better system than that?

AB. No, I don't think so, not really. We used to - if we wanted to control a number of tubs coupled together, I used to see one guy, you know, really he was an expert, and he didn't even use snibbles, he used these - what we called - couple of fish couplings you know, for tying two rails together over the holes, they're about that long, 4 holes, 2 bolts go through the rib of the rails, and he used to sit with about 20 of these and he could put them in a wheel. The right snibble made by the blacksmith had a handle. Your handle was quite square. But we adopted a system in the pit bottom, well, you see cement, all the roadways in the pit bottom were cemented to the side of the rails and you could take a

hutch sleeper and put it in between the two wheels and you controlled just like a brake

Q. Held them back?

AB. Held them back until they landed at the pit bottom.

Q. You know they had brake wheels on cousies and brake wheels on cuddies, you'd think they could have devised something, even a lever?

AB. No, there was never anything like that devised.

Q. So, from a drawer in no. 26, where did you then go?

AB. I went to - well, I went for a short time - 26 was slowly but surely becoming exhausted and that was one thing about Scottish Oils, they tried to put you up wherever possible in another pit, and I was - my section was becoming exhausted and one by one we were all drafted to different places and I went to Westwood, but only for a short period and then my father got the job of sinking - starting to sink - Burngrange pit in 1935 and I went with him to - he started leading the road in round the back of the cemetery and then we finally got up to where the two shafts were sunk. My father had to put them down through to the rock then the pit sinker, you know, the experienced pit sinker, took over from there, took up the contract from there.

Q. Can you remember where they came from, the pit sinkers?

AB. The McGallums, they came from down about Ayrshire. Jimmy McCallum and - they were two brothers and they came from somewhere down about Ayr and they were great and they sunk shafts, all over the country. And they did most of the pit sinking for Scottish Oils, for I was at two jobs, two pits they sunk, Burngrange and the Fraser.

Q. So you'll know Jock Crombie?

AB. Jock Crombie? Aye, he's dead.

Q. He's dead, aye.

AB. He worked with me in the Fraser.

Q. I've interviewed him as well.

AB. Did you?

Q. Yes, in fact he died just after I interviewed him.

AB. Is that so? He was a West Calder man.

Q. Yes, he was.

AB. Oh, I knew Jock Crombie.

Q. So as a pit sinker - well, as the beginning of a pit sinker, what did you do?

AB. At the beginning - sinking the Fraser pit, that, was my first road up the ladder, up to..... .That was my first appointment as a deputy or a fireman, and we worked 12 hours to cover a 24 hour period, the pits were open all the time, the pits had to be open all the time, and that was my first deputy's job. And that's when I started studying at Heriot Watt's for my Mine Manager's.

Q. How did your situation - because I mean you obviously went up the ranks when you became a fireman, how did the situation alter? How much better was your pay and things like that, because you know you read of mines managers and gaffers as they're called going into gaffer's rows, did that - you know – continue as well?

AB. Oh, yes. Well, you see a young man - your first thought - say you're going to get married, and you want a wee bit extra cash, you can't build up a house on say, a roadsman's job and pay, or oncost, any oncost job, the wages weren't that good, so it was always their ambition to get on and try to make a wee bit more, more especially when you're going to get married, you had to look for the job with the most money.

Q. Your aspiration was to become a mine manager?

AB. Mine manager, yes.

Q. So how did you go about becoming a manager?

AB. Well, I went - I started - first of all I started going to all the classes that I could think about, I went to first aid classes for about 16 years. From not long after I left the school. I went to them in various places. Whenever I heard there was a doctor taking a first aid class - Seafield - I travelled over to Seafield, I went to Addiewell, and then West Calder, my home town. I travelled - every time there was a first aid class opener! Up, I went and joined it. I was interested in it because I knew if I was going to be in the pits seeing some of the accidents you would have to have it up here as to know what to do. And it was then that - when I saw what my mother had to go through, I wouldn't like my - if I got married I wouldn't like my wife to go through that either, rather than die as an old miner I'd go the other way. I started attending classes in Heriot Watt at the mining department

Q. Did the company give you the time off, or did you have to take the time off?

AB. I had to take the time off

Q. So that meant losing money?

AB. Yes. There was always a Saturday class, when my mates were going away to their football matches, I was up in the Grassmarket studying. Then the War came along in 1939 and as it progresses beyond the first or second year, restriction on rail travel meant I couldn't go so I took out a correspondence course with the University Mining School at Cardiff and I did that for 3 years - and I went to sit my exams through in Glasgow, for my undermanager's, and I passed. Then I took a wee rest and I subsequently carried on with my correspondence course for my mine manager. The correspondence course was quite good, very good. I just can't remember the cost now, about £130 or £140 in those days.

Q. That was on oversman's pay. And what was your pay?

AB. I'll need to look that up. I'm not certain. That would be interesting for myself.....1st January 1955. £690 per annum.

Q. So that was about one fifth of your pay?

AB. Aye, but I was earning less before that.

Q. Yes, you would be, of course.

AB. I couldn't find - this is a record of what I was earning, you can see it there for yourself what I earned when I started.

Q. Oh yes I can see that - staff increase to salary.

AB. That was promoted to an oversman.

Q. To an oversman.

AB. Aha, but prior to that I seem to have mislaid my wages.

Q. It appears to go - every six months your pay went up?

AB. Aye, well, I think.....

Q. No, I think it was, because after that it was yearly.

AB. The first six months would be my trial period.

Q. That's right.

AB. To see if I was going to make a good boss!

Q. It's amazing how some years it went up say by £20, see this one, it went up only about £15?

AB. That's right, yes.

Q. In 1957, then £20, then it was up again by £45, then £55 in 1962. There were jumps, some years it went up less than some other years.

AB. Yes.

Q. That's a good record book you have there.

AB. In this you can see all the deductions too, you know, there's the graduated pension scheme. It started on the 31st March 1961, did you know that? And you see that I had 22/1d kept off, that's the new graduated pension scheme started 31.3.61. 31.4.61 - 22/1d. That's - I've been in that and you'll see what I've paid, you'll see how I've been counting it all up, adding

it all up, and that was when I retired. But it was interesting to find out - I think it meant a tanner on my pension, 6d on my pension when I retired, 6d a week.

Q. Not much, is it?

AB. And I paid it since 1961.

Q. You strike me as a very meticulous man.

AB. Oh, I was always that way.

Q. And do you think that helped you in your job at all?

AB. When I was an undermanager I used to take a – I had a notebook. A young boy started under me in the pit - I had his name, address, date of birth and... and I learned this from an old colleague, he lived down here, old Dave Reston, have you ever heard that name?

Q. No, never heard of him.

AB. Aye, that was a boy. He was an undermanager too. And that man, he had a notebook bigger than that one and he not only took details from some of the young lads that was in the pit, there wasn't a haulage engine but he knew it's rate of travel, he knew the number of tubs it was capable of taking up, and letting down, and he'd all that in his.....shorthand, he'd do everything in shorthand and transfer it into his book. Oh he was real.....Him and I were very good friends. Got a son still living and.....he became a mine manager too.

Q. Did he, a shale mine manager?

AB. No, he left not long after he got his certificates and went to the coal.

Q. What was the attitude of the men, the men who had been your workmates, when you became – when you came up the ladder?

AB. Aye, well, they were a wee bit.....

Q. Resentful?

AB. Well I wouldn't say that.

Q. Uppish?

AB. No, it was just that - if I went into a pub, I would stand by myself.

Q. Oh, I see.

AB. One would have liked to have come over and had a drink with me, but.....

Q. I see. It was a question of the gaffers and the workers, there is a difference.

AB. Aye. I went to school and was brought up practically next door to one lad, Alex Cowie was his name, and - it was only natural, I wasn't bothered what my status was when I was out. I wanted to go and speak to him, but...he was a workman too.

Q. One of the boys?

AB. Yes.

Q. And do you think that may have stopped a few more men from bettering themselves?

AB. No, I don't think so. There was quite a few in my category that was born and brought up - in mining rows, there was one or two big fry but - I'll tell you one thing, I had to do some

Q. No, why?

AB. I didn't think I had it up here. I started and then when I got interested in the mining problem I stuck it. I didn't let anything stand in my way.

Q. And did you find Scottish Oils, or you know, your bosses, did they encourage you?

AB. Oh yes, oh, they did that.

Q. You mentioned earlier on that you wanted to improve yourself because of what your mother had been through. What did you mean by that?

AB. Well she brought up about ten of a family and it was just in a miner's row, and you can imagine six brothers, your father and brothers coming home from the pit, well, they didn't all come home at the same time, that would have been impossible, but on different shifts, and that big pot was never off of the fire, at the side of the fire, running hot water to get washed, for you know what coal miners were, no baths in those days, and wet, what we called

the moleskins, moleskin trousers, soaking wet, coming home from maybe working in water, and these had to be turned up in front of the fire and the kids coming in from school couldn't get near the fire, for drying pit clothes! Or when they were washed and outside if the weather was inclement we had wee flannel pit shirts.....

Q. Peewits?

AB. And there were wee black peewits hanging there to get put up in front of the fire too. There were these enormous ranges, and my mother had to get up in the morning, kindle the fire, rake out the ashes. Luckily we had sisters too and they had to bend their back.....

Q. Although with all those boys employed in the mines the family wage would be good?

AB. Yes, oh yes. But then you see your mother would just be beginning to get the advantage of that then they'd get married one at a time, so it didn't last long. I can remember when I was the bread winner and there was three below me. And I got married when I was 21 and that was her left with three still at school and my father had got a bad injury up at the Baads coal and - 30/- a week she was getting for compensation every Thursday. When I was at the school I used to have to take a half day off and go out and get that 30/-. Aye, it wasn't a life in a miner's row, not for the wife, anyway.

Q. Did things improve later on or were they more or less the same? I mean for a miner's wife?

AB. Gradually they improved, oh yes, gradually they improved. There's no doubt about that. Like - we weren't too bad where we were brought up, it was a miner's row I admit, but outside - we had an outside ground closet. But it was ours, it wasn't communal. Further down the road it was.

TAPE ONE - SIDE TWO

Q. They had to share the toilet?

AB. Yes.

Q. What about the wash-house? Did you have communal wash-houses as well?

AB. No, the one part of the house, what we called the scullery, it wasn't a kitchenette, there was a boiler built in, in brick, and a wee fire underneath with a chimney in it, and the clothes were boiled in that boiler. And then do you remember the old fashioned days of the wringer? And after the wringer went the mangle. It was anything but a good life for a woman in the old days. No way. I couldn't have - I would never - I don't suppose I would ever have got married if I thought I was going.....

Q. No, you couldn't visualise any wife of yours doing that, which says much for you.

AB. Oh, no.

Q. So you decided - you became an undermanager did you not?

AB. Aye, that's as far as I got.

Q. Why did you go - because of the closure of the mines?

AB. The closure of the mines.

Q. Could you not have gone on to the coal?

AB. I could have if I had so wished but then at that age, when the Scottish Oils closed, I was in my 50's, and that was why - Scottish Oils were pretty decent, they offered us a job - I think there was three in the whole area, all under-managers, who had admitted to retirement age, and they drafted us down to Grangemouth, into a lab., because there were chemists doing shift work, and they didn't like it, they didn't enjoy it very much, well, you can understand that, for you qualify to become a chemist and you have to come out to work shifts, drawing samples of oil and bring them over to the lab and test them and all that.

Q. Was it not in a sense a kind of demotion for you?

AB. Oh yes, have a look at the salary - did you notice that?

Q. No, I wasn't really looking - a third, oh dear.

AB. I think I'm correct in saying that, it's such a long time since I studied this up! You can see what I was earning when it shut down, 30/6/62 I was £1135 per annum. I was transferred to Grangemouth 25.6.62, salary £825.

Q. That's £300. You lost £300 per year, that's a lot of money.

AB. Aye, that's a lot of money. And then in six months they gave me £35 of an increase.

Q. Yes, and that's a lot of money to lose.

AB. Yes. and that's what I gibbed at more than anything. Because they couldn't give me a house, I had to travel.

Q. So you had more to spend yet again.

AB. I had more to spend.

Q. So what did you do, how long did you last in Grangemouth?

AB. I stayed there for - I think it was a year..... (mutter in background)

Q. And then you took early retirement?

AB. I took early retirement through my health – no, I left Grangemouth and I started as a laboratory assistant – resigned 19.1.63. That would be barely a year, transport difficulties I've got here and then I started in - two or three days later as a foreman in charge of stores and despatch with Bruce Peebles down in Broxburn. And I retired from there, and I went to be assistant manager at North British Distillery at - near Muirhall - know that whiskey bond warehouse?

Q. Oh yes, up at the top.

AB. I was there for 11 years.

Q. Oh well then, that was better, yes.

AB. I retired from there in 1974, for health reasons.

Q. So that's ten years now you've been retired.

AB. No, being an active man, I got the chance of a job along in West Calder High

School, as a technician you know, cutting wood and cutting the timber for the wood working classes and steel and that.

Q. Quite right!

AB. I stayed on that for three years. I retired then, my health was catching up with me. So now I'm waiting on word from the Royal Infirmary to go and get a heart.....

Q. You've got a heart problem?

AB. ....valve..... so that's my life story!

Q. That's your life story, oh well, that's good. Now you mention Burngrange disaster there. What was your involvement in that?

AB. Well, the - I was an oversman over in West-wood pit at that time, and Mr. Stein the boss drove in and they phoned down the pit to get me, and he was very excitable and he said he didn't know what was wrong up at Burngrange but it must be something serious when he said he was on his way up and he told me to go into the ambulance room and bring every available bandage, stretcher, what have you, bring them up to - and bring a rescue team with you.

Q. When was that, on the Thursday night?

AB. Was it not a Friday night?

Q. It could have been a Friday. 10th January?

Q. Yes, that's right, 1947. Yes. Can you remember the time?

AB. The time that the Boss phoned me? It was about ten o'clock at night, and the explosion I believe took place at around 8 o'clock. That's in Burngrange. And I made my way up there, phoned up for a taxi and got everything up, Rescue team, I just went right down the pit, because I knew the pit like the back of my hand, and I just asked where it was and Mr. Stein the boss told me to go down to this face where it was and to look after the firemen, now that was people, very good men, you must admit that, and they didn't know

know the first thing about the dangers of the underground, fighting fires underground. And that was the job I got, to.....this squad of firemen..... and they were in trying to put this fire out to try and get in.....to the men that were trapped, and we tried and tried and tried but it was impossible. And these men sat underneath - I was sitting too. I had two men at my beck and call, whenever I shouted the roof was getting too dangerous you know, all the heat of the fire was expanding the metals, what we called the metals, and they just clattered down you know.

Q. I would have thought the heat would have affected the shale as well?

AB. Oh yes, it burned furiously, oh the black smoke was appalling. It hung over West Calder for days before they got it sealed, up - well after the - I was one of the first in along with the mines inspector, offer we got the ventilation restored in where the bodies were and with me being around I knew everything. I knew every - the men, see they were - just prior to the disaster, one or two pits were running short and there were some of them getting drafted up to Burngrange.

Q. A lot of them were from Breich, Polbeth?

AB. Breich, yes, well when all of the bodies were out, see it was me that got the job of putting on the tag before they went into the baths at Addiewell to get dressed. And then they subsequently – after the bodies were all out - they started to seal the area off completely so there would be – no air would get in – and what they did was – they had 24 hours coverage with a manager and an undermanager, on all through the whole 24 hours and that was no joke. Till it was all totally sealed up and they started getting shale in another area.

Q. And that the area was never re-opened again, was it?

AB. No.

Q. Why do you think – although I know what the inspector's report says – you - what

do you think was the cause of that explosion?

AB. Oh, the cause was quite simple. It was - the faceman had fired his shots. The faceman working on this, taking out a pillar of shale, what they call stooping, and when they fire the shots they go and have a piece, a drink of tea and a slice of bread, and they sit and have a smoke, that's to give the smoke a chance to clear, the result of firing the shots, and then the fireman was on his way round while they were sitting there, and he said, "There's a bit of weight coming on, there's one or two pit props broken, you'd better go up, and you'd better go and replace them, get them replaced before you start to fill". So I don't know if it was the faceman or one of the drawers, I don't think it would be the faceman, because the faceman had an electric cap lamp, and his drawers, they had carbide lamps, whether it was one of the drawers I do not know.....

Q. The report mentions two benchers or runners, two young men. Was it Sam Peck and David Muir?

AB. David Muir was a drawer.

Q. A drawer. Now they were sitting and apparently was it Peck who said, "I'm going to tell the boys about it", but apparently he never did?

AB. Well, I'll tell you what happened. It was the young haulage boy, you'll see on that thing I served my apprenticeship as a haulage boy, well, he was a haulage boy and his job was to - it was an incline like that and there was gathering points every - and the top bench - we call them benches - bench no. 1,2,3, and that's all there was on that brae, and the boy who was haulage boy, he collected the full tubs from each of those benches and he sent them up to the pit bottom and an empty rake comes in and lifts another one.....so he was in bench no. 1 I think it was, he knew that would be the first place where he would get three full tubs, and he was sitting there, and out came Davie Muir with one full tub, and I can't remember - it must have been the chap Rae - I'm not very sure, but he came out with the second tub and that made his rake, he coupled them

up and while he was doing so he started play acting. Being a young boy he took his trousers down to show him – and all of sudden - "boom" the first explosion and they stopped "What was that?" Off went another explosion, and the wee boy, the young boy, Todd was his name, he got up and ran for the boys. One of the drawers said he heard him telling the boys - the faceman.....but whether they had ignored it or not I don't know. Whether they had ignored the bencher – but naturally you would have thought one of the two drawers would have said, "Right, it's time....."

- Q. You think somebody would have - and even some of them - a faceman, an experienced facemen. and they must have heard the explosion?
- AB. We always had a mine manager, his name was Mr. Bowman, and he was a man just much like myself, he believed in safety, and he used to come down the pit and he used to gather all the men in the district round about him and he used to give them lectures on just such things as that, and what to do in the event of such an occurrence taking place, because after all it's a rare occurrence. That's the biggest explosion there's ever been for years except for the one up here in No. 5 and you would have thought some of the men.....
- Q. That's what I thought as well.
- AB. But there was one man.....he put Mr. Bowman's theory - he tried to put it into practice - when he knew he was trapped he wandered away and he went into a closed area.....
- Q. That was George Easton?
- AB. Yes, that was George Easton, he went into a closed area and he fenced himself off and put screencloth up and tried to live on the oxygen that was laying in the area, but it got him.
- Q. This is a thing. One of them - apparently there was someone else was going to try and go for a trap door?
- AB. No, there were no trapdoors in that area.
- Q. No trapdoor, so that is wrong.
- AB. There would be hanging screens.
- Q. Hanging screens, that's right, Bratis cloth screening.

AB. Bratis cloth screening. But where there's stooping workings, you don't - trapdoors are way, way, further away.

Q. Now, knowing the circumstances as you know them, remembering the situation it was like in there, how much longer than the rest of them do you think George Easton survived?

AB. I wouldn't say much, I wouldn't say much.

Q. So it really was a futile exercise?

AB. Oh yes, oh yes it was, because if he had been in another - he was at the farthest end of that place, down in bench no. 3 right down at the bottom and away in this level road where the drawers drew out of and he was in right at the very last place but I can mind, I went in with an inspector and that's when they got him.

Q. It must be a dreadful sight when you walk in and see all those bodies?

AB. I'll always remember, we lifted Henry Cowie, lifted him, and he was sitting - you've heard the old saying about miners, how they sit on their hunkers?

Q. That's right.

AB. That's what you call sitting on your hunkers.

Q. Sitting on your heels?

AB. Aye, he was sitting looking at his lamp. We naturally thought that we could just lift him up and put him in - put him in a stretcher to lift him up this incline, and then up to the level road where you took them out and up, to the pit bottom, but that's how we had to lift Henry, straight up and took him into the hutch.

Q. As he was?

AB. One guy, big Tony Gauchan, we straightened him up once we got him in the fresh air. There's a bell for signaling and he had come up and he must have stood talking to the rest of them, must have said, "I doubt we're trapped". And he was standing and he was holding on to this bell wire as.....

Q. How long do you think it took them to die?

AB. Oh, it couldn't have been much at all, seconds.

Q. Was it? Oh, that's not too bad.

AB. Seconds, seconds. And the amazing thing about it is up in the - I had read about it and was lectured about it on many occasions, carbon monoxide, it's affinity for blood is 300 times greater than oxygen. So he's got 300 – you know how you can't live - your blood can't be without oxygen.

Q. That's correct, yes.

AB. But blood will accept carbon monoxide 300 times quicker, 300 times.

Q. I see, so it doesn't take much to kill you?

AB. No, no. I used to have it all off at my fingertips, .1% I think if I remember rightly, .1% breath for five minutes, and.....

Q. That's you?

AB. Yes. But what really amazed me, and as I say, I'd read about it, and was lectured about it and often imagined that seeing is believing. When these 15 men were stretched out on that pit bottom ready to go zip in that pit cage, I looked at them all, and they were all healthy looking men. Beautiful colour, red cheeks, that was one of the effects of carbon monoxide, very healthy looking.

Q. Was the content - I know there was two or three day's difference - but was the content of the carbon monoxide ever calculated when you went down, just to give an idea of how much carbon there was?

AB. Carbon Monoxide in the atmosphere? Oh, the chemists were never away from that place but I never got around to asking them. The only thing - the only experience I had was - we were sealing off this particular area and – where the explosion occurred - and it was a very nasty job, you know, there were broken - being in a stooping area there were cracks here and cracks there

but we all had to work, we had to try and seal them up and I can remember Mr. Keddie the boss coming down to me and saying "I think you should go into the nearest point where these men were working Alex" he says, "and take a canary with you." you see, "and warn these lads and get them out as quick as possible in case there's any sign of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere." you see. Well, I goes in, sits down on this - puts a nail on the tree and hung up the canary, and kept having a look at it, and it wasn't to my - and I felt my heart going - these boy's walking backwards - kept saying to them, "How you feeling? You feeling all right? everything O.K.?" Little did they know I was trying to feel how they felt in comparison to myself! But periodically you see they were getting away out to the fresh air and I was sitting there all the time and it wasn't until I was about to give up Mr. Keddie came back in and said, "everything going all right, Alex?" I says, "No. Feel my heart, Mr. Keddie". He moved, he took his footrule out his pocket and he plonked it and the canary dropped off the spar!

Q. It was dead?

AB. It was sitting on the spar dead. How that was humanly possible I don't know. And there it was, it toppled off down into the bottom of the cage. "Take your time" he says. "Walk out there gradually, into the fresh air." I wasn't long out in the fresh air till I was O.K. again. But there must have been a wee bit carbon monoxide got out, and it had nailed the canary.

Q. Why is a canary chosen, why not a blackbird or any other bird?

AB. Well, they usually use a mouse sometimes, some places they use a mouse.

Q. A mouse? Oh, I see.

AB. Aha, because a warm blooded creature like that, they've got a smaller heart, you see, and it affects these smaller creatures quicker than whenever you see it affecting a canary or a mouse then you know it's time you were in. That's the reason, because they've got this small...

Q. Because it's tiny, they're a tiny bird?

AB. The smaller the bird the better.

Q. I see, yes.

AB. Or the smaller the mouse I suppose. They've a smaller heart and that would be affected much quicker because - remember, it would only take very little carbon monoxide to get you or me.

Q. That's right, yes.

AB. So hence the reason for having a small live animal. Oh, sometimes the canary can be saved too, because the canary shows panic and it starts to flutter its wings about. That one, it just sat on that spar.....

Q. Well, perhaps he was a bit.....overcome so quickly perhaps?

AB. He might. I don't know, but he stiffened up pretty quick, and.....

Q. Of course, you just kept looking at him, seeing.....

AB. I just kept looking at him, and as long as he was sitting on the spar, I was quite happy! You see, I didn't want to go over and upset the bird, you know, and have it exhausting itself, you know, when a stranger goes to a bird's cage and it starts to fly from one end to another but I didn't want to do that, I was just quite content to have it sitting on the spar, and breathing the same stuff as me! And sitting the same as I was doing!

Q. He wasn't breathing, though, was he? How long, you know, after the explosion, how long did the pit - the full pit - come back into operation again?

AB. Oh, it took quite a long time. I'd be telling a lie if.....I just can't remember. Because at that - you must remember at that time we were inundated with one of the heaviest snowstorms we've ever had. We were lucky to get the coffins out - because the snow was level with the cemetery wall, and it's about 6' tall, the wall. Transport would have found difficulty getting out and in.

Q. Yes. I remember. Jock Gibb - I don't know whether you know Jock - he was the ambulance driver.

AB. Oh, Jock, he comes from old Livingston?

Q. That's right, he's still alive, he's still there, yes, he was saying it used to snow like - you know, snowflakes like half crowns! I remember him describing that.

AB. Aye oh aye, it was a severe storm. Really you know, I can remember the day that the funerals went up the West Calder street, and it was a bitterly cold, cold, frosty day, and the snow was high.....We were lucky to get the corpses out, before that snowstorm. There was damage.. ....

Q. In a case such as that, say you had been unable to get the corpses out, what would have happened?

AB. Well, the only experience ever I had was during the Cresswell Colliery disaster in the north of England where the whole pit had to be just totally abandoned and sealed off.

Q. And were men left in?

AB. I think the men were left in. 262 of them if I remember rightly. That was a long time ago though, Cresswell colliery.

Q. And does that become very much like what they have in the Navy, you know, a grave? Does the pit now become a grave?

AB. Oh, no. You mean as far as Burngrange is concerned?

Q. No, not as far as Burngrange is.....there no bodies in Burngrange, but anywhere else?

AB. If there's any bodies left? Oh, I don't know, but I'm only sure I've seen.....there must be another Cresswell colliery, because I've seen it involved in this strike.

Q. It could well be.

AB. And I'm just wondering if they maybe opened up that seam again. I don't know.

QB. Unless they gave that name to another pit?

AB. Maybe, maybe, near.....

Q. Near a place called Cresswell. Or it could be the same area but it's just a different pit opened up there, just the same as Burngrange used to be. You know, you had 1 and 2, but you used to have Burngrange No.30 which was opened before the ordinary Burngrange, so that could be what it is.

AB. No. 30, where did you get that number?

Q. From the catalogue, it is no. 30. Because Burngrange 1 & 2 wasn't the original Burngrange, you had Burngrange 1, 2, 39.

AB. In Westwood there were no rats ever seen except one that fell down the shaft. But it was polluted with mice.

Q. Was it? But not rats?

AB. No rats.

Q. And Polbeth 26 had rats?

AB. They had rats, and the coalmine, Baads coalmine, it had rats. And I can't remember what was at Hermand, what lodgers we had there, but how do you account for that fact?

Q. Something to do with the atmospheric condition?

AB. Well, that's what we used to think, but that's.....it's no.....because there were ponies in Westwood, and it was nice and there were ponies in 26, and it was virtually all rats and of course they frequented - that's where they all went, was round about the stables. You got them in the workings, right enough, because you know how miners take their piece, dropping crusts and that, the mice in Westwood, they were everywhere.

Q. Was 26 – no, Westwood was a pit.

AB. Westwood was a pit.

Q. And it had rats? It had mice?

AB. It had mice.

Q. What about Polbeth?

AB. Polbeth was a mine.

Q. And it had rats?

AB. It had rats.

Q. I wonder whether that's the reason why, they could go down of their own accord?

AB. Yes. In Westwood, the mice got down in the food for the horses.

Q. Yes, that's right, and that would be how it is.

AB. But they always puzzled me. Why. But that could be the answer right enough that the rats got down on their own down a mine.

Q. Down a mine, yes.

AB. Down a pit?

Q. Because, you see, if a rat went in a hutch it would be seen and it would be killed, automatically by a man.

AB. That's correct, because Baads coalmine, it was a mine and there were rats there, no mice.

Q. Winchburgh and Duddingston, they were mines and there were rats in there as well.

AB. That's correct, yes.

Q. And Burngrange was a pit and there was no rats.

AB. No. That's what it's been.

## LIVINGSTON OIL MUSEUM

File No: .om/2/04/04

Mr AB (West Calder) - Summary of transcript prepared by J Davidson, Museum Assistant, April 1988

### Industrial

#### Information:

##### Polbeth No1: 26:

I left school when I was 14 and started work a No: 26 pit pony driver. From there, as I got stronger, I worked myself up to heavier jobs. There were a few different jobs around the pit bottom. The pit ponies would take the empty tubs to different districts and bring out the full loads to the pit bottom. You didn't require a pit lamp or anything, you took the tubs off as they came down from the surface and loaded on the full tubs to go up to the surface. You served that sort of apprenticeship at the pit bottom, and then you were sent out to the workings to do haulage jobs, either driving an engine or the back balance braes. That is, the weight of 3 or 4 tubs, full tubs, going down, drew the empty tubs up. It didn't require any engine, and it was controlled by a brake, just a wheel with a rope around it about three times. As it came down, the boy just stood at the top of the brae and worked this brake. This brake which was round the wheel which brought them down. A cuddy brae worked on a different principle. A hutch was filled with any kind of material to load it and it worked with a double purpose wheel fixed to the stoop side up at the top and the wheel. The rock came off that pin, down round the wheel on the cuddy, up around another wheel at the top, and whenever the miner filled the hutch, he put his rope into the hutch and shoved it over, and loaded cuddy came up. You would have to see it actually working to understand it better. That was the job for the haulage boys who had a calling to be a faceman.

I went through all seasons of shale mining except one, I never drove a winding engine. The one at the top, a very important job. MY first job in shale mine 26 was as a miners drawer. We used to draw anything from 15 to 20 hutches a day, depending on the length we had to draw the hutch to the gathering point. The empty hutches tared about 5 - 6cwt. and when the full load went over the weights, it would be about 25 cwt.. You could take off about 6 or 7 cwt, and that was the amount of shale you filled. It would be about a ton.

From a drawer in No: 26, I got job with Westwood for a short period. Then, my father got the job of sinking Burngrange and I went with him. He started leading the road in round the back of the cemetery and then we finally got up to where the two shafts were sunk. My father had to put them down through to the rock then, the experienced pit sinker took

over from there. They were the McCallums (the pit sinkers). They did most of the sinking for Scottish Oils. They sank Burngrange and the Eraser Pit. Sinking the Fraser Pit was my first road up the ladder. My first appointment was as deputy or a fireman. We worked 12 hours to cover a 24 hour period. The pits were open all the time.

Examination for Undermanagers certificate - 1942

I then started studying at Heriot Watt's for my Mine Managers certificate. To become a Mine Manager I started attending all the classes I could think of. Not long after I left school, I started going to First Aid classes because I knew if I was going to be in the pits, seeing some of the accidents, you would have to have the knowledge as to what to do. I had to take time off to attend classes at Heriot Watt Mining Department and that meant losing money. I sat my Undermanagers exam through in Glasgow, but still carried on with my Mine Managers course.

Soon I was promoted to an oversman and my wages increased. I was on trial as an oversman for 6 months to see if I was going to make a good boss. When I was an Undermanager, I used to keep a notebook with details of the young lads working under me in the pit. When I reached retirement age, Scottish Oils drafted us down to Grangemouth to work in a lab. That meant a big reduction in wages. I took early retirement from Grangemouth in 1963.

Burngrange Disaster

10 January 1947:

I received a phone call telling me to go into the ambulance room with every available bandage, stretcher and anything else I could lay my hands on. I went straight to the pit, there had been an explosion. I was told to go to the face where it had happened to look after the firemen. They were trying to put out the fire to get into the men who were trapped. We tried and tried but it was impossible. The roof was getting dangerous because of the heat of the fire. It was making the metals expand and they just came clattering down. The shale also started burning furiously. The black smoke was terrible, it hung over West Calder for days after until they got the pit sealed up. I was one of the first men back in along with the mine inspectors, After we got the ventilation restored in where the bodies were. A lot of the men were from Breich and Polbeth. I was given the job of putting the tags on the bodies before they went into the baths to be cleaned up. After all the bodies were out, they started to seal off the area completely so there would be no air getting in. They had 24 hours coverage with a manager and an under manager on through the whole 24 hours until it was all totally sealed up and they started getting shale in another area. That area was never re-opened again. We had a mine manager, Mr Bowman, he believed in

safety, and he used to come down to the pit and gather all the men in the district around him and he used to give them lectures on safety and what to do in the event of an explosion taking place. Because, after all, its a rare occurrence. That's was one of the biggest explosions there has ever been for years.

There was one man who tried to put Mr Bowman's theory into practice when he knew he was trapped. He wandered away and went into an enclosed area and fenced himself off and put a screencloth up. He tried to live on the oxygen that was laying in the area but the gas got to him.

The explosion was entirely due to firedamp. The gas was ignited by one of the drawers cap lamps. It wouldn't have taken the trapped men long to die, seconds.

The chemists were never away from the place but I never got round to asking them how much carbon monoxide there was in the atmosphere  
I was really amaze when these 15 men were stretched out on the pit bottom. I'd read about the effects of carbon monoxide, and was lectured on it, but couldn't really imagine what they would be like. I looked at them all, and they were all healthy looking men. Beautiful colour, red cheeks, that was one of the effects of carbon monoxide, very healthy looking.

The only experience I had was when we were sealing off this particular area, where the explosion had occurred. It was a very nasty job, there, being in a stooping area, cracks here and cracks there, but we all had to work to try to seal them up. Mr Keddie, the boss, told me to go to the nearest point where the men were working and to take a canary with me to warn the men to give them enough time to get out if there was any sign of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere. I went in and put a nail on the tree and hung up the canary. I felt my heart starting to go funny. I kept asking any of the men that past how they felt, trying to see if there was any comparison to myself. But periodically, they were getting out into the fresh air and I was sitting there all the time. Just when I was about to give up, Mr Keddie came back and asked me if everything was going all right. I told him that my heart was going funny. He took his footrule out of his pocket and nudged the bird. It dropped off the spar. It had been sitting on the spar dead. How that was humanly possible, I don't know. There it was, toppled to the bottom of the cage. I was told to take my time and to gradually walk out into the fresh air. I wasn't out in the fresh air long 'til I felt fine again.

Canaries and mice are most often used to detect poisonous

gases because being warm blooded creatures, they have smaller hearts and it affects smaller creatures quicker. The smaller the creature, the better.

It took quite a long time after the explosion to get the pit, the full pit back into operation again. At that time, we were inundated with one of the heaviest snowstorms we'd ever had. We were lucky to get the coffins out, because of the snow. In some places, it was about 6' deep.

Cresswell  
Colliery  
Disaster:

The only experience I ever had of being unable to get corpses out was during the Cresswell Colliery disaster in the north of England. The whole pit had to be totally abandoned and sealed off. I think the men were left in. 262 of them, if I remember rightly. That was a long time ago. The bodies just had to be left in. I don't know if that seam was ever reopened.

Wages:

When I was an undermanager, my wage was £690 per year. That was in 1955. When I was promoted, it went up, but I can't seem to find my records of what my wages were when I was an oversman. Every six months, my pay went up, until my trial period was over. After that, they went up yearly, some years it increased by £20, some by £15, then in 1962, it was up by £55.

Domestic  
Life:

There were about ten of us all living in a miners row, so you can imagine, my father and five brothers, all coming home from the pit, not all at the same time, but on different shifts. That big pot was never off the fire, running hot water to get washed, there were no baths in those days. Wet moleskin trousers, soaking wet from working maybe in water, had to be hung in front of the fire to dry, and the kids coming home from school couldn't get in near to the fire. There was an enormous range. Mother had to get up in the morning, kindle the fire, rake out the ashes luckily there were sisters in the family, they had to bend their backs too. Being a family with all those boys in the mine, the family wage was good. But just when mother was beginning to get the advantage of it, they'd get married, one at a time. When my father was badly injured and my mother was left with only three still at school, we were all away married, she was getting 30/-a week compensation. It wasn't a life in a miners row, not for the wife anyway. Gradually things improved. We had an outside closet, it was ones not communal. We; didn't have a communal wash house either. One part of the house, the scullery, had a brick boiler, the clothes were boiled in the boiler and then came the wringer and the mangle. It was anything but a good life for a woman.

Leisure

Activities:

No leisure activities listed in this transcript.

Education

I left school when I was 14. When I decided that I wanted to become a manager, I started attending all the classes I could think of. I went to them in various places. When I was going to First Aid Classes, I went to Seafield, Addiewell and then West Calder, my home town. I started attending classes at Heriot Watt at the mining department. That meant losing money. There was always a Saturday class, when my mates were going away to their football matches, I was up at the Grassmarket studying. During the war, restriction on rail travel meant I couldn't go so I took out a correspondence course with the University Mining School at Cardiff, I did that for three years. I went to Glasgow to sit my exams for my undermanagers and I passed. Then I took a wee rest, and then subsequently carried on with my correspondence course for my mine manager. The correspondence course was quite good. Very good. It cost about £130 of £140 in those days. That was about one fifth of my pay.