

MR & AR,                      MR born 1916  
14 MAIN ST                    AR born 1921  
WEST CALDER

INTERVIEW 5.12.84

MR, AR, SR Sara Randall

MR ...and one of the aspects of living in that period of time, from the beginning of the century right up until 1935 was that we made all our own social activities. It was quite dramatic that, inasmuch as here we have a kinder spiel (photographs) My father was the conductor for that kinder spiel.

SR What's a kinder spiel - a sort of child's game?

MR It was Cinderella and the crystal cup, or these various things at that time. Well I happened to be in that there, and many of the older people, these people of my age liked to see that on an occasion, that was 1929.

SR Did it go well?

MR Aye, we booked the picture house for three nights every year and my father had, I think, nine of these things, from say 1922 to 1929. But that's very descriptive of the social life, of the effort that was made in those days.  
[comments on looking through photos]

MR Everybody looked forward to that because there were competition in the area. You know there were a man, Jack, down at (...) kirk, he run in opposition to my father. But he couldn't do it on the same scale. And then there was the church..., and then there were the Band o' Hope. Now, all these different activities was the means of getting to a soiree (pron. swaree), you know what a soiree is, a party, we call it a soiree in this area; you were always sure of getting some kind of entertainment. The soiree was a party when you had one or two games...and you

took your mug with you, we called a tinny, .....(inaudible) you got an orange or an apple, there was a big box of apples and oranges, and you got one on the way out. So, you went to the Band of Hope, you went to the Limefield kirk, you went to the West kirk, you went to the Rechabites and all these various organisations. It was a great thing because you took ...( inaudible).

SR When were you born?

MR 1916.

SR In West Calder itself?

MR In West Calder.... (photos) That's a copy of my father working down a shale mine at Westwood works. He, like many other people at that particular time, had a lot to say about the educational system at that time...(inaudible). To say about 95% of the youngsters who went through the educational system were more or less fodder for the mines. So the education of them was probably determined by other things that don't come into the (inaudible) nowadays. So, in fact, a lot of the talented people escaped education, ...(inaudible)

SR They just had to leave school because they had to work?

MR That'll be it. There were very many talented people, tradesmen, even people like my father, he had an ability to do a lot of things. It so happened that the Rankin family were good at music. I always remember, talking about strikes, he and his brother and my cousin, went begging. Because they'd no money. 1926. And the 2 of them made more in one day, begging, than they did in a month.

SR Did they go begging round here or in Edinburgh?

MR In Lanark. And of course they got (inaudible). People invited them to the house, and gave them bread. He'd come home with a sack over his shoulder.

SR What did they play?

MR Well, my father sung, he was a tenor, and his brother was a bass. And they could do anything from grand opera to, you know, ordinary singing. And this is no idle talk. They were good singers...So they had, I don't know whether they'd a good time or a bad time, cos we were told not to say anything at all during their lifetime. That they'd to do this but nonetheless they did do that kind of thing.

SR They just did that during the strike? They didn't normally go off singing or..

MR No, no. It was just like, even before that, cos we'd a 1922 strike.

SR I didn't know that. In the shale mines?

MR It was just in the mines. You see this was basically shale mine, any coal that was in this area here- my father worked in the coal mine as well as the shale mine, but the coal mine was to provide gas coal for the retorts at Addiewell Works.

SR Was that at Baads?

MR That's right. There was quite a difference, you know, between being a coal miner and being a shale miner. If you were a shale miner you were kind of up market. Certainly there were a political background to the shale workers totally different from the coal workers.

SR In what sort of way?

MR They were Tory. I don't think by choice.

SR By what then?

MR Threat.

SR From the managers?

MR It was said quite conclusively in this area if a manager ever found out they voted the wrong side they didn't need to bother turning up for work in the morning. It was said in Gavieside they were quite adamant this was the case. You know, that people had to go out to vote for the right person or else. (inaudible) over a period of a few generations have become, you know people just become Tory, you see, for convenience. But quite a number of people, it affected the cooperative too, because my father, like myself was in the cooperative, and er the amount of Tories that were on the board of management of the cooperative... they even tried to form a non-political party... and this is how people, even yet, in this area vote Tory, just because they've inherited it from their fathers and grandfathers.

SR Whereas the coal miners over at Whitburn and Blackburn and so on, they would have all have been staunch labour?

MR Oh aye. You'd have been pushing a wee bit (inaudible). So that was the political significance of staying in this area. We were between coal and shale because, just at Addiewell you went into the coal area. That was a different kind of person. Really, a shale worker was up market. You know, he was the guy that went to his work clean and came home clean.

SR Did he earn any more?

MR No, they were all classified in this area as oil workers. No unions or that sort of thing they were all oil workers. They did set up, through time, an oil workers union, but it didn't recognise any other trade. So that, although my father he was president of the shot firers union at the tail end of, just before the second world war. And he was walking on ice. Because management didn't like trade unions. Because the shot firers union was a different kind, because they had a responsibility to keep

things open (inaudible ) so it so happened my father had to work three days a week to keep the mine open because you can't go down unless the mines are made safe – safety officer.

SR Like the safety cover that they're providing now?

MR That's right... The other two things that distinguished the shale workers, from the coal workers, was that a coal worker went about with a half shut knife. A half shut knife, that was the expression ( inaudible) you ken, old men, well they were old men that, people didna reach their retirements, in the old days, but they went a bit like that - because they were working so low [demonstrates a man bent over double] and they had to wear special shoes, a sort of bluish leather shoes, chrome leather boots...(inaudible). Other thing that distinguished of course was that you went home clean that was the shale worker. And the coal of course, was black. And I stayed in a but and ben on Dexter street, and my father would come home and wash himself in the sink. We never had any toilets in the house, we never had a bath till after I came back from the army – 46. Previous to that, previous to the war, there was a Friday night. The tub was brought in from the wash house outside and filled up. This was the night we washed, so everybody was plonked in....

SR How many of you were there lived there?

MR I had two of each. So there were 3 brothers and 2 sisters.

SR In 2 rooms?

MR In 2 rooms. Just holes in the wall for beds. My mother and father slept in one, the 3 boys slept this side and my 2 sisters slept in the other.

SR What was your toilet?

MR We were really well off, we had a shared toilet. It was a water toilet we had, we

were well off. Up in the Happy Land for instance, tremendous place, no place like the Happy Land, it was dry toilets. And one of the features about the dry toilets was that every time it was emptied all the shop keeper's shut their doors, bolted their pens and held their noses. ...

SR He just sort of carried the buckets along like that or?

MR No, it was like a small tank. But that always created a bit of a laugh for young lads. Because, the dark nights, bits of paper from Edinburgh went into the dry toilet you know, people opened the door and flung it in.

SR Did you go and work down the mines?

MR No. I escaped that.

SR So what did you do when you left school?

MR I went back to school for another year, but I got a job as a painter in West Calder cooperative. I would have been 14 years of age.

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SR So you stayed at school until you were almost 15?

MR I went back to school. I was off school for about 3 months, but there was no sign of a job at all. And my father said if you want to do any thing in this life you'll have to go back to school. Of course, he wasn't saying that I was that clever: 95% of the youngsters. There were 40 odd in my class and the year before there were 56 in my class.

But basically they didn't, I'm not going to say they didn't care, but the need wasn't there, you know. The only place where you were going to get a job was in the mines or in the cooperative. Now if you got a job in the cooperative you were set for life. I started away up there in the cooperative, and I had a good working (... inaudible.) It so happened I got the top job in the cooperative. I ended up President

of the cooperative. Now I never had any illusions of being that at all I just, you know how the cake crumbles.

SR So you just worked in the cooperative for all your life?

MR I worked in the cooperative for about 48 years. I retired early. Otherwise I'd have had over 50 years in the cooperative if I'd kept on working. But the cooperative movement itself was one of the main elements in the social life of the people in this whole area.

SR So it wasn't just a retail outlet.

MR The cooperative dividend paid the rates and the rents. Every quarter. How important the cooperative was in these days nobody can ever say properly. Because no money coming in, and everybody was on the parish. Duncan Haigh was the man he was the source of all good and bad...(inaudible..)

SR Who was he?

MR He was the parish clerk. And he determined whether or not you were going to get anything I think they got three half crowns, or something like that. They made all kinds of judgements on the people who were in dire needs. And of course what appears to have been, that's where all the poor people come and stayed, wandering round about trying to eke out a living, and that's where all the beggars stayed, for 6d I think it was a night. And just next to it was the soup kitchen. You see in the 1922 strike and the 1926 strike, they set up a soup kitchen, by and large the cooperative provided the meat, and the tatties and turnips and the leeks and then one of the folk made the soup and made a big pile of it in the (inaudible) that we used to boil our clothes in. And then my mother used to say she used a pitcher, a metal pitcher and she used to say "away doon and get some soup, and go doon the back way so's naebody'll see you".

SR This was when your father was on strike?

MR Yes. You'd say everybody was coping. My wife was a wee bit better off than me, she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth.

AR My father was an upholsterer, he had a shop on the Main Street. And I don't actually know very much about mine workers, because we never had anything to do with them although we were all living together. It was just a different aspect of life.

MR At that particular time I couldna say there were more mineworkers who could use your father's skill in any o'these, because they couldna afford it. You know, things were bad.

SR So, what were the customers? the farmers and the doctors?

MR Aye, the tradespeople.

AR I'll show you a notebook showing mending such and such.

MR My father used to cut hay, do shoe making, and make trousers.

.... This was in between strikes. When they didna have any money. And, his brother had the same kind of thing. I know my father paid £9 for the horse and the lorry and he got fish fra Edinburgh and he hawked fish away up to Woolfords. Now, all the people up there had worked at the works, so he knew everybody. Plus he got part of his, they had a choir up there in Woolfords, and they had a choir in Breich. And it was the presenter of the kirk in Addiewell.

AR I'll tell you the best thing about the horse and cart. They had a horse drawn caravan, and the Rankin family went to Balquidder...and this annual event - going to Balquidder in a horse drawn caravan. Well they unhitched the horse from the caravan and the horse ran away and they couldn't catch it. And they spent all their holiday trying to catch the horse. And I don't think they ever got to Balquidder...

MR That was another thing too. People didn't go on holidays. I never went on holiday till after the war. I didn't know what it was. There was a couple of people had horse

drawn, it was the cooperative again,...

(both talking together about horse drawn traps then about 'aliens' in the war)

SR What was the 1922 strike about? Was that wages or hours or..?

MR A combination of both.

SR Did they get what they wanted?

MR No. They got a compromise reached. What had happened at that particular time, 21/22, was the miners had been having a big wage during the war time. Of course, the Depression started after the war. So it meant a reduction in income coming into the house. And this caused the 1922 strike. It didn't last quite so long as the other, nor was it as severe, but nevertheless. The 26 strike, you had to have been here. People talk about deprivation it's( .. inaudible..) My mother used to say to me, you used to go and say "Mother, can I go and get a piece?". She says " well do you want margarine or jam?". Not both, oh no. And I've seen my mother saying to me " away down to your granny's, tell her I sent you doon". Now that's all the same. ... Another thing my mother used to do "away up and meet your father coming doon from the pit". And West Mains was what, two miles away " and if he's got a pit piece he'll give you it". My father used to save a slice of bread from his piece, he got four slices of bread and a flask of water, and oh, it was a great thing getting a pit piece. I used to race up that road for half a slice each....

( about Carluke jam)

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MR There were two distinct areas in West Calder, there were the Happy Land and West Calder.

SR And the Happy Land was a sort of shale miners, oil workers area.

MR That's where all the poor folks. Really, poor, poor people.... You were talking about depression. I doubt very much whether you could put your finger on a particular

part. People weren't depressed to that extent. I think they just took everything in their stride. If you happened to be poor, you had a good neighbour and people helped each other. And you seen a dramatic difference when the Happy Land was cleared...I'd say that was during the war. Yes, second war. And, unfortunately, due to circumstances they weren't the same close knit community. In the Happy Land you were next door to your neighbour, but you all lived, either inside with the family....my father was one of nine, I was one of 5.

AR I was one of 2. That was unusual.

SR Were you? and what sort of house did you live in?

AR I was born in the Main street, well in a house in the Main Street. When I was about 3 we moved into Place, they called it. There was a block, 4 in a block. They did have you know, toilets not a bath, but you had a toilet to yourself not hot and cold water.

SR You had water in the house?

AR Oh aye, water in the house and gas. And I think we put the electricity in.

SR So you were a lot better off in terms of amenities?

AR Aye, but I never thought about it.

SR Did you have water in the house?

MR Water in the house, yes.

AR Even in Dixon Street you had water. That was unusual.

SR And gas and electricity?

MR Well we put it in ourselves. When electricity came up into West Calder.

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SR Apart from during the strikes, but at other times were people so poor that they had to choose what they could eat because they didn't have enough to have sufficient, or was that just in the strike period?

MR It was just in the course of the strike. Every family went out to pick berries, bring them back to make jam, this kind of thing...All these kind of things. I always remember going away fishing with my father, it was a great thing.....  
( holiday jobs not very clear)

SR When you first started work you continued to live at home? and what happened to your wage?

MR Yes. I had 11 shillings a week till I was 21 years old.

SR You kept it or you gave it to..

MR I gave it to my mother.

SR All of it?

MR All of it.

SR Did she give you any back?

MR She gave me a shilling. And after I was 21 my father said to me "you can make up your mind give us all your wages, for your keep and we'll buy you all your clothes, or give us £2/10/-." Aye it was when I got a bigger wage. When I was 22 I got my first wage, I got £3/5/3d. ....(..prices etc..)

SR When you were working at the cooperative you were just working 5 days a week?

MR No, 6 days a week. Up until 1 o'clock on Saturdays. ... When I started you didn't get, you got a week's holidays without pay, and that was sports week.

AR You used to work Christmas day, cos I always remember..

MR Oh aye.....  
... about Irish but not clear recording..

MR ...but the main reason for that was that the Irish would come down there providing cheap labour.

SR They'd take lower salaries?

MR Oh, aye. They'd always work for a penny or tuppence less than the going rate.

SR Did you work before you got married?

AR Oh yes.

SR What did you do?

AR ...I got a job working in a baker's shop.

SR Here in West Calder?

AR Mmm.

SR Do you remember, was there any pollution from the oil works?

MR Aye. The time they came up from Oakbank, the pollution there was worse than here. Dust. because they'd to tip all the spent shale on the bing. 24 million tons of shale. And for years and years it just blew, in the wind on everybody's washing. On the sports day in particular, the sports day was always a bad day in this area it seemed the wind blew. Ken it was an east wind and it blew in every direction and you went up there and you come hame and you were black.

AR Everybody laughed at each other because they didn't realise they looked like it themselves.

MR Now these were the days when we had professional sports. Now West Calder sports was traditionally a (crownie?) and everybody had the day off work. At that particular in my younger day, it was on a Friday and it was an idle day, and it was a holiday. The sports day was a holiday. It would be with the Saturday. .. about Saturdays and Sundays and church going... entertainment....

SR So there were other shops other than the cooperative?

MR Oh there were more shops then than what there is now.

SR But the cooperative dominated everything?

MR Oh yes. They always used to say if you've got a shopping list at the cooperative you're safe. There were loads of shops. There must have been at least two tailors above the cooperative having a tailor.

SR So what did the cooperative do?

MR Tailor and dressmaking, bakery it was quite unusual, butcher, they had everything: shoe mending. When I started at the cooperative it was all solid tyres and the balance of the vehicles were horse drawn. They were set with solid tyres and after a while they converted into pneumatic tyres. Wooden spokes in the wheels.

AR There was a shop and it had nothing but hats. It had one window full of hats. Now you picked out the hat that would suit a person in the village. Or so and so would just love that purple hat. Oh it was great.

SR So what jobs did you do in the cooperative?

MR Well, I started away as a painter... I was painting outside buildings

First side ends here

...famous people and musicians from West Calder....

...his work as convenor of Mid Lothian council in 1960s and chairman of the education

committee....

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SR When you went to school were there still children going barefoot or had that stopped by then?

MR Oh no. That was the normal thing at Easter time you were a big cissy if you had anything on your feet.

SR So it wasn't that you didn't have any shoes- it was a macho thing to do?

MR Yes, I think.

AR I remember when I was at infants school I had a slate, and a wee tin, like an empty tobacco tin with a wee sponge in. We used the slates.

... talking together about school, homework, tables...

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MR ...but you didn't have shoes, you had tackety boots.

SR What is tackety?

MR It's an iron stud, that they bring round the middle three times, with studs. They were called tackets because they were deeper.

SR But the boots were made of leather?

MR Oh yes.

AR But when the tackets wore down they were replaced you see. It was to save the leather.

MR Just like a horse. And of course, folk that were better off, they had sparables. That was a thinner stud. They had sparables. And then of course there was the U plate, the toe plate.

SR Did your father work in the mines all his working life?

MR 50 years.

SR Was he born in West Calder as well.

MR Yes.

SR So, he started work as soon as he left school?

MR Yes. Not in the pits. He started work as a tailor, and he wasna making a sewer so he just went into the pits.

SR If you could have got a job when you were 14 in the pits would you have gone, or

were you waiting for a job that was not in the pits?

AR If I could have got a job in the pits, if I could have got a job at fourteen I'd have been in that job. Even if it was in the pits.

... mining jobs and other jobs of relatives...

MR I don't think anyone would wish their family..

AR Nobody would wish their family to go down the pits. You took what was there. If you'd no money you had to earn something to help out.

SR But if you had the choice between the pits and something else..

AR You'd choose something else.

SR There were the Oil works weren't there. Were they not better?

MR Didna care for the works. The Oil works they werena very labour intensive. I think it was again up market being in the oil works, but we were clean and that was just the upper crust of the society in Addiewell. You know, there was a division between workers - in the coal mines you were either just 'a worker' or an under manager.

AR What happened about the limestone mine up at Hardale?

MR The limestone mine up there, that was purely for Glasgow steel works.

SR Did people here work there.

MR Oh aye. They worked up there, but mainly for Hermand...

AR You see there was an awful lot of this 'who you were' that got you into a job.

MR I think probably the worst job of the lot was working at the tables. There were women folk. When the coal come off there it was put on a conveyer belt and pulled through this shed, and then picked all the stones out. Right along the ( inaudible ). Women and young lads....It was the most hellish job. It was just corrugated iron up either side and the coal come in at one end and out the other end. And the rain and snow all blew through that.

SR And were they still doing that? You remember women doing that?

MR Oh yes.

SR But there was nothing like it with the shale?

MR Oh, the shale was totally different. The shale just went straight into the retorts.

...Doctors, especially Doctor Young

SR Were the doctors much better off than the rest of the population?

AR Well, they were paid better.

MR You see, he was a very powerful man. There were only two people, three people in, four people in West Calder who meant anything. They were all about 10 ladders, 10 steps down from Dr Young, ..(inaudible )..because the place needed a personality of his stature. He dominated every scene. He, and a Doctor Anderson, who was a doctor of religion, they were at loggerheads all the time. Dr. Young would hear the gas works, was wanting, and Dr Anderson wanted electricity in the kirk. The Cooperative was the first generator of electricity in Scotland that lit the streets. We were the first to have our streets lit by carbon pencils.

SR And it was the cooperative that..

MR Generated that. The first village in Scotland with electricity. Anyway, Dr Anderson went up there and cut all the pipes and took them down to Dr. Young's house and draped them all over his gates.

....characters of West Calder....

....Rankin family .....

.... photos....

... .dairies....

MR It so happened, in 1926 strike, that Tarbrax closed down. It was reckoned to be the best seam of shale.

SR Why did it not open again? Do you know? they hadn't run out at all?

MR ( inaudible)

SR What happened to all the men who worked in Tarbrax? Did they move into West Calder and carry on working here?

MR They all just moved anywhere. From 1926 till 1936 there was contraction.

SR Round here did you have the same thing as they had down at Duddingston: working three weeks out of four?

MR That was, when, 1932-36. Everybody had that.

SR Even in the cooperative. I thought it was just the oil workers and the miners.

...inaudible...

about workings of cooperative - bits inaudible

MR .[the dividend] was a rate per pound. We paid 3/9d a pound plus 9d bonus. Made it 4/6 in the pound. Over a long period of time.

AR That's right. I mean people used to come in by bus and things the day they paid the dividend. Made a day, it was a holiday.

MR Of course they had sales on too.

AR That's right, they had tea, a day out.

MR The rates, they paid their rates. You see everything was round that. It was every quarter.... We had branches all over the place. We had Philpstoun and Broxburn, Uphall and Pumpherston, East Calder, Mid Calder Stoneyburn, Blackburn Addiewell, Forth, all round this area.

SR And they didn't have their own cooperatives at all? Just the West Calder one.

MR Just West Calder.

... going through books on the coop.....

END OF TAPE

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