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Restrictions:

6/8/86
Date of Agreement

X Dave Miller
Narrator

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Address

Wright wy 82732
City, State, Zip

Teresa Jordan
Interviewer

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12 Apr 1988
Accession date

Mary Murphy
Archivist

NOTES ON USING MATERIALS FROM

"IS THERE LIFE AFTER COPPER?" ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Because of limited funds available for this project, audited transcriptions of the tapes were not possible. However, there are detailed notes for most of the interviews. The user should be aware of a few limitations on the use of these notes. Unless otherwise specified, the notes were taken at the time of the interview and were not later audited against the tape. They can give you a good idea of what was covered in the interview. However, if you find something specific that interests you, you should verify it with the tape. Because the notes were taken quickly during the interview, they may include inaccuracies. If you use information for attribution, you must go back to the original tape.

There are rough transcriptions for many of the interviews. Again, because of time and funds available, these transcriptions were not later audited against the tape. They are more accurate than the notes, but again, if you use information for attribution, check it against the original tape.

A few interviews have restrictions against use of the tape. The notes for these have generally been read and corrected by the subject of the interview and are accurate. Check the releases for further information.



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Dana Miller

Dana Miller, former Anaconda/Arco worker from Butte, now employed at ARCO's Black Thunder Mine, interviewed in his home in Wright, Wyoming, by Teresa Jordan, June 8, 1986.

Notes taken at time of interview; not a transcript except for portions in quotation marks; not audited against tape (except for quotations).

Dana was born in Butte; father was a rancher on the Big Hole and then worked for the Forest Service until he retired. He died two years ago in Dewey. Dana's mother is in Butte. He has an older sister, younger brother, younger sister. His brother worked for ACM a little while in school at School of Mines; now he lives in California. His name is Wayne.

Dana liked the ranch, but liked big equipment better. What did his family think about his working for ACM? No reaction; they wanted him to do what he wanted.

D. went to work for ACM in Feb, 1961, was an equipment operator nine years, day's pay boss for one year; then he left to work for New Park Mining Co. out of Utah, in Dewey, MT; mined silver on Quartz Hill. That lasted a year. Then he went back to Butte; worked as a machinist -- a mechanic -- for two years. Then he was a salaried boss until he was laid off in 1983.

Q:

Did the Operating Engineers have an apprenticeship program?

No, just training. D. had been an equipment operator before he went there, so he started out as a cat skinner. He had worked, before he went ACM, for Minerals Engineering out of Grand Junction, Colo, at their operation on Bryant (check) Creek, the Calvert Hill Mine, up in the mountains from the Dickie Bridge. He was with them two or two and a half years. They shut down when the price of tungsten went down. He had logged before that.

D was about 25 years old when he went to work for ACM. He put in his application, they called him almost immediately. He didn't expect a job so quickly.

Q: Toward the end, working for ACM was definitely one of the better jobs around. Was it when you started with them?

It was getting to be one of the better jobs outside of construction.

Q: Did you have a sense it was a very secure job?

Because of Dana's previous experience, he didn't have the sense that any job would last forever. It was his first job with security; it was more secure than others had been.

Q: How was Anaconda/ARCO to work for?

D thought they were fair to people. For example, when they shut down the last time, a lot of companies would have just given you your last check, but ACM gave a sizeable settlement.

Q: You changed from days' pay to boss -- was that a hard transition?

No, because it happened gradually. He spent a year as a pit boss, and in the garage he worked part time as a days' pay boss for two or three years before going salary. It could be a problem for some people.

Q: Was there camaraderie in the work force under ARCO?

Yes, there were good feelings. The only difficulties were between one union and another from time to time. Boilermakers might pull a strike, throw everyone else off work; that caused bad feelings with the others.

Q: Were there problems with having 13 unions?

There would be a problem with strikes; if one pulled a strike, everyone was out of work. But in some ways, the separate unions caused better working conditions. Black Thunder is not union.

Q: How would you compare working conditions between the two?

They are not that much different. In Butte, you had the security of seniority. Here, you don't have a lot of little grievances. If you do have a problem, you can take it to a supervisor. People don't feel the need for unions here.

Q: Some people complained about the jurisdictional lines among the unions in the Berkeley Pit. Did you think that was a problem?

It got way out of line. A job that should have taken two people to do would end up taking fifteen people and twice the time.

Q: How could you change that?

If you maintained the 13 unions, it would take a lot of cooperation. Probably, you would have had to reduce the number of unions, but that would have been difficult to accomplish.

Q: What did you think when you learned of the ARCO buyout?

D thought it was good. The Company was in deep financial trouble, and it needed somebody to help it out. Otherwise, it would have closed down earlier.

Q: Was there a difference in working for one over the other?

No. Nothing changed. There was a change in the names of the higher authorities, but it didn't affect Dana.

D worked until June of 1983. He was told then the operation would shut down totally. He was told that the possibility of it restarting was remote. Everyone was given severance according to the number of years they had worked for the Company. Hourly workers got SUB payments; there was a lump sum for the salaried people. D doesn't remember what it was exactly; something like two or three weeks pay for every year of service.

D's wife's name is Alta. She worked, at that time, as postmaster for Divide.

Q: What did you think your employment outlook was at the time?

There weren't too many jobs around the country. D looked into a job with International Nickel in Indonesia. ARCO called him for an interview in June, 1984. He took that job. He had worked at odd jobs. He was not too worried about finding a job right away because of the severance pay.

Q: Was Alta worried?

No. They were living in Dewey at the time.

Q: How did you feel about moving away?

Dana looked at it as an experience. Alta was born in Fort Benton, lived most of her life in the Butte area. They had strong ties to Butte, as everyone raised there does. And they wouldn't give up their home there. (in Dewey).

Q: Are ties to Butte stronger than ties elsewhere?

D doesn't think so.

Q: What do you miss about Butte?

The mountains, the rivers.

Q: What do you like about Wright?

The good people in Wright. There is not as much recreation here, but there is fishing and hunting around -- in the Black Hills, in the Big Horn Mountains. D and Alta have a son, 25 years old, lives in Dewey, works for the Forest Service.

Q: Do you know anything about the history of Wright?

D isn't sure about the specifics. But Wright was just Reno Junction until ARCO started the town. Before, it was just a bar, gas, cafe. That was eight or nine years ago. It began to look like a town about six years ago. A lot of people own their own home sites or lots. ARCO has turned the town over to it's residents -- the town is now incorporated. It elected a mayor about a year ago. The town was financed by ARCO, not by taxes. Property values are on a par with Butte.

Q: What is the population mostly?

Mostly family people, young families. There are very few old people here.

The closest town in Gillette. It offers about anything. Casper and Rapid City are maybe more fun to go to for a change. RC is about 125 miles away; it's about Missoula's size.

Tape 1, Side B

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The Butte people here know each other. D knows everybody, but visits with only two or three. It was a hard move for those where the family didn't move. It's 512 miles from Butte, and some men commuted. Dana was down here for six months before Alta came. She would rather be in Butte, but she has no problems with being here. They go back about every two months.

(Dana tells me after the tape is turned off that one thing he did when he was unemployed is learn to fly. He now owns his own plane, a Cherokee. He bought it used for \$12,000.

Q: If someone asked you where you were from -- say you were travelling in Arizona -- what would you say?

If he were in Arizona, he would say Wise River, because that's home. But if he were asked in Casper, he would say Wright.

He is an equipment operator here. There is the same equipment here as in Butte -- 170 ton Euclinds, Wabcos, Unit Rigs. The shovels are all the same. the method is the same. With coal, though, the seams are basically pure coal. This seam is 55 or 60 feet high. Most of the coal here is shipped south -- to TX and LA. Some goes to Minnesota and that area.

Over 500 men work here. Wages are a little higher than Butte. Right now, base wage is \$17/ hour. There is good insurance, paid holidays, same vacations. Gross income is more than in Butte, but it costs more to live here. they own their own home in Dewey, free and clear. Here they have mortgage payments on the trailer, and rent their lot.

Q: How do you view the changes the shutdown has made in your life?

It would have been nicer if the Butte operation continued, but it didn't hurt Dana that it ended. A lot of people would like to be in his shoes. ARCO supplemented the move, and if you wanted to buy a house, they supplemented it -- if, say, you bought a house for \$70,000, they would give you \$10,000 back if you bought it and lived in it five years. At the end, you didn't have to pay back the down payment.

Q: How many from Butte got work here?

Possibly 50 or more.

Q: A lot more than that were put out of work in Butte; why do you think that you were able to get a job here?

D can't say. He said he would be willing to relocate. A lot more could have come if they had wanted. A lot didn't want to come, or came and moved back. For Dana, it was day to day the first two weeks. But nothing else paid as well as Butte.

Q: Some people express real anger toward ARCO. How do you feel?

D feels that they had an obligation to maintain the operation as long as possible, but if they had to curtail it, they had to. ARCO did an exceptional job keeping it running. The government doesn't guarantee you a job; how can a company?

Q: How do you feel about job security here?

It's as secure as Butte. It's not really secure, but the Forest Service isn't secure either. Nothing is forever.

Q: Were you surprised at the shutdown?

No, D had hopes that it wouldn't shut down, but he was not surprised when it did.

Q: Did your attitude make the transition easier?

Yes. He didn't know if this job would be for three months, three years, or thirty years. He thought he would just come, see what good he could do.

Q: A lot of people just plain don't want to move. Is there a solution to that?

Only on an individual basis. "I don't think there is a solution ... other than ... people facing up to reality -- nothing is forever. Just make the best of a bad situation is all I can say. You just have to face up to reality. For some people, I know, it's really hard. It isn't that easy on anybody to get up and move. But you have to face the facts that if there isn't a job there, or a living for you, you look elsewhere. What I think makes it tough on a lot of people, there were families for maybe three or four generations that were born and raised in Butte, their fathers worked for the Anaconda Company, their grandfathers and their great grandfathers; and they expected it always to be there. And when it wasn't, it was a pretty dramatic experience ... I feel fortunate because I had hopped around a little before I worked for the Company, and I knew that a job could curtail at any time. A lot of people didn't. When they got out of high school they went to work for the Company, and they figured that job would be there until they retired."

Dana's closest friends have found work around the Butte area or moved to this area.

The Company just laid off 150 at Thunder Basin. They offered "The Package," three weeks pay for every year in service, plus eight weeks paid job-search time. They bought homes back, gave insurance for six months. Dana and Alta considered it. With what his wife would get, they would make about \$45,000. But they make more than that in a year. Alta works in accounting here; she has for 18 months. She learned it through extension courses through the college in Sheridan. She

worked part time at first, then became full time a year and a half ago. She had worked for Anaconda Company for five years before they got married in 1969. That didn't count in her part of the package because she hadn't vested her rights then.

There are beautiful schools here, a good school system. The basic attitude of the community is happy. There is some griping, like there was in Butte. Some love it here, some don't. It's a living. D has seen a lot worse.

Q: How about the work situation?

There are good people here. They work 12 hour shifts, then get seven days off in a row. You work 7 to 7. Alternate working days and nights. Workers voted on 12-hour shifts; they had a trial period for three months, then voted it in again. You work forty hour weeks; some four days a week, some three, and then seven days off in a row. Alta workes 7 to 3:30, straight day time.

Tape 2, Side A

Do many wives here also work for the Company?

Yes, quite a few -- maybe 10%.

Labor relations are basically as good here as you would expect. It's good. There is always bickering, but it is as good or better than it was in Butte. There are very few jurisdictional problems. Sometimes seniority enters into it.

Q: If you had to choose between working in a Butte-type union situation or a Black Thunder-type non-union situation, which would you choose?

That would be hard to decide. Unions are necessary in a lot of operations. But if you can get by without them, you are better off. There are no strikes here, no work stoppages. Strikes were tough in Butte. Whether they were necessary or not, Dana doesn't know.

Q: What do you think we will see with Washington Corps. running the Butte mine?

D's hopes are high, but he can't see how it will work. Copper and moly prices are not that great. He's doubtful.

Q: If Washington starts up tomorrow, would you take a job?

Possibly. He would have to look at it real close. The price of copper and moly is not that good. He is dubious how the operation could sustain itself.

Q: Why were there layoffs at Black Thunder?

There was a high ridge and a lot of overburden to move. Many were hired temporarily for that and knew they would be laid off; others knew they would go when that was done. The price of coal decreased with the decline of oil, but these layoffs were probably more geological.

Q: How much more mining will there be here if things stay the same as they are now?

They figure the mine is looking at about 20 years. ARCO has Coal Creek, but is mining it on a very limited basis. It has fewer BTU's, and is less desirable coal. The coal in this valley is rated the best coal in the West. There are something like 17 mines here, five or six companies. This area is the Thunder Basin National Grasslands.

End of interview.