The following is an interview with Ernest Robert Ayres (Ernie). The interviewer is Brenda Ayres. The interview takes place on October 26, 1998.

ERNIE: I came to Butte in 1940. I tried to get a rustling card and they wouldn't give me one because I wasn't born and raised in Butte, or I didn't go to school here either. If you went to school in Butte or was raised in Butte you could get a rustling card, otherwise you couldn't. Then in 1941 they opened all the cards up to all the public. So, I went down and got my card and the first mine I went to work in was the Leonard.

Before I went down in the Leonard, they took me on a visiting tour in the mines - down on the 28 hundred at the Leonard. What a difference there was in the mines. Down there they had all the walks was all boarded along the sides and along the ditches was covered with boards and everything was cleared up - there was no danger at all.

They took us up in the stope where they had a buzzy set up, showing us how to drill with it. So, I hired out in the mines and I started out in the Leonard. I went down in the 29 hundred - all together different than the 28th! Terrible! Hot! Gassy! The 28th was cold and clear. We went down on East Colusa.....I've got to think a minute.

BRENDA: It was hot in the mines. How come it was so hot? Because it was so far down or what?

ERNIE: No, the ground is just warm. It is just naturally hot - poor ventilation. The ventilation is what makes it hot, but I went to work on the 29th at the Leonard and we went down to East Colusa. The first time I'd ever rode in a cage. Boy what a drop that was. You're here and then the next thing you're there, 29 hundred feet. And then I hired out a motorman and the boss knew I was a greenhorn, so he put me to dumping little cars, little ton cars. We dumped them into a stoper. They'd bring in a load of about 10

one ton cars then I had a partner and he'd dump one and I'd dump the next one. We had to swing them sideways to dump them. I worked two weeks there and I quit. I said, "To hell with it, too God damned hard of work." I didn't want no part of that so I quit and went back to Idaho. Then I come back and went down again.

BRENDA: How much later did you come down again?

ERNIE: I came back that fall - around Christmas.

BRENDA: Because you couldn't find work in Idaho?

ERNIE: Well, I went to work down in Idaho yeah, but there was no money in it. I was chopping beets down there, so I come back. I started out at $6 a day, which was big money.

BRENDA: In the mines?

ERNIE: Yeah, $6 a day we got in the mines. Then the next time I went to work, I went to work on the 22 hundred saw a motorman. I worked with a fellow named Ollie Spears. All the other men was getting drafted and going into the service and I was lucky, they didn't want me. So then when they finally did call me, why the mines got me deferred and I took it.

BRENDA: So, they could get you deferred?

ERNIE: Oh yeah. From the Army? Yeah.

BRENDA: I didn't know that.

ERNIE: So that's how I got deferment, because I was in the CC's for four years and I damn sure didn't want no more of them officers - them "second Lueys," I seen all of the Army service I ever wanted to see.

BRENDA: What did you do in the CC's?

ERNIE: Well, I was head cook and I worked in the Forest Service and I worked on the cats. I done purtner everything. I run the jackleg and different drills and stuff. Same thing as in the mines. Out in the mines I worked on the motor for awhile with Ollie Spears and I quit and I went up to the St. Lawrence and went drifting with a fellow named Ned Bowes. We ran a mucking machine drift.

BRENDA: How do you do that?

ERNIE: A mucking machine is a regular mucker and it's got a bucket on one end and a handle on two sides. One lever works back and forth and the one on the right works the bucket. You can go in and pushing ahead and working the bucket. As you go ahead you get the bucket full and you dump it.....it's full of ore.

Waste drifts are drifts and laterals are where you get your ore. We follow the lead on the ore. Then you have a crosscut where you drive a 7 x 9. The other drifts are 9 x 11 and they are all timbered. You got a contract and you got paid so much for whatever you done. You couldn't go below minimum wage. If you were contracting and you didn't make any money that week you still got minimum wage.

.....what they did - they paid you so much. Like we used to get $3.65 for bracing, that's running foot and $1.10 for mucking. $1.10 a running foot for mucking. You

usually cleaned about a five foot round everyday. You and your partner worked the day shift and the other crew worked the night shift. Then the next two weeks you'd change over an you'd go night shift and they go day shift. They won't be on the same contract, though.

BRENDA: How did you pick your partner, or did they pick them for you?

ERNIE: No...if you didn't have a partner they'd holler at the gate when you went through. You'd have to stand outside the gate and hire on.

BRENDA: Every day?

ERNIE: Yeah, whenever you'd hire out. They had a rustling card office down on the 800 block on East Broadway. You go down there and you'd get your rustling card. Which happened, mine was 85529, and then you'd go down and you'd rustle the mines and then there'd be two men hiring there. Probably a foreman and an assistant foreman. They'd be the two main men of that mine. There was about 10 different mines that you could rustle at. There was the Leonard, the MT Con, the Badger, the St. Lawrence, the Steward, Anselmo, Emma, Orphan Girl, Tramway, Belmont - you could rustle any of them. But usually you hired out at noon. They started hiring at noon at different places. Lots of times, you'd make two or three- if you didn't get on at one mine, you'd go to the next mine because they'd have too many men. Like the MT Con and Stuart. Lots of times there'd be 1000 men rustling at one time. They'd hire so many and then they'd just shut the window down. They set in a little shack like and then they'd hire you and sometimes why if you'd go down and you didn't like the place, you'd go back up and quit right then. Then you'd go back down to the rustling card office and get your card again...lot's of times why you was contracting and you'd go down and you didn't like

what they paid you could call for remeasurement. Once a week the measuring man would come around and measure what all you'd done. He had it all on a card...you got so much for everything you done. You got so much for laying track, so much for breaking ground, so much for mucking the ground up and so much for timbering and so much for moving stringers overhead. When they first started we put timber all the way up, six or seven boards. At the last we had three what they called safety boards. We got so much a board. Then they had the drifts which was on the level, then they had the shafts, where you drove the shaft up from one level to the other level. Sometimes it could be 100 ft., sometimes 200 ft. There was quite a difference between the two levels. You had a hoist there, some had an air hoist, some had an electric hoist to raise the timber up and down the shaft. A timber chute is what you raised it on. You'd raise it up and your partner would be up above to take it off. He had a rope, a little 1/4" rope and he used to use a fish plate to fasten the railroad ties together with it. He had that on a post. Your partner would pull that up until it hit a nail and stop. (Note: this was a type of makeshift signal between the partners). If he wanted it lowered he'd hit that twice or three times and you'd pull it up. So, either way you raised it or lowered it and if you wanted to stop you'd stop it at once. If you wanted to lower the timber, you'd send the chain and the weight back down. It was on a cable, see. Then he'd pass another set of timber on and hoist it up - that was the way you'd hoist up all of the timber.

BRENDA: Was he in another level up above you?

ERNIE: He'd be up anywhere from 50 - 200 feet above you. You'd hoist it up. You'd start on a sill and you'd try to set a timber. That's four posts, now a raise - they had what you'd call a six post raise or an eight post raise. A six post raise would just be a manway and a chute and the other way - an eight post would be the center would be the manway - on each side would be a chute where the ore would come down in them two chutes.

Then they'd have, up above one set on the sill which would be about nine feet where you had a chute there and a rock would come down the back. They had a chute and there would be two boards across it. You'd raise that and they run out into the car and you'd fill up the cars. The cars run on the track on the level see. The chute would be up there. The regular timber being cut like a shovel, only it was made out of wood. You'd take the two boards - one set here and the other set there - then you'd run the bottom on if it was big rock, you'd use both of them. If you wanted to stop, you'd put your feet in down to hold the rock from coming down.

BRENDA: Do they ever crush their feet?

ERNIE: Oh yeah, sometimes they'd get hurt if a rock hung up in the chute. You'd go up the manway and you'd have to reach in with a chute bar. That there is a 1/2" bar and it had a handle on it with a pipe on the other end. It's about three feet long. You'd reach in there and free the rock that sometimes hangs up in there and then you'd free it and it would go down. Sometimes you'd have to go up and blast that. If a timber would come down the chute then you'd have to get an ax and chop a hole in the chute and reach in, put a stick or two of dynamite in there and set it off and blast that down.

Then what they called a stope was when they mined out the rock in between the two raises - they'd have two of them raises set 100 ft. apart. Then they'd drive a drift above the sill. Drift timber was usually nine feet high. They fit like this - the two posts and then the cap, a 3: slagging from one set of timbers to another. Then when you get up there then the first floor they would line that out and usually they'd take it and move the lagging - they called all these boards laggings. Most of them was 7 x 9... You'd have a ladder here going up and you'd have your fanbag. You always had a fanbag.

BRENDA: What's a fanbag?

ERNIE: That's what they put air in. That's usually 12" a raise. Sometimes they had 16" - different sizes. They had a fan down on the sill, turn it on and they blow air up to the sill.

BRENDA: That was the only air you had?

ERNIE: Yeah - they had air doors every so often, they had an air door running down a drift tunnel and they'd circulate the air whichever way they wanted. The air would come in and they'd go up in these stopes.

They would dig out the first floor and go from one raise to the other. Then they'd put in what they called stope timber. It was 7 x 9, I think it was. Most of them was about a ft. around and they'd have two of them. The piece on the top they called the cap. It went between two posts. The two between the two posts are girths. They're like a framework. Everything was a frame.

Then they had the raw drifts where there was no timber. You went up with a stall - by a stall I mean you take a regular piece of a pole, cut it off whatever length you want. Then put one end against a footwall and then on the hanging wall you put a piece of lagging - a piece of board - that's what we called em - maybe 3 ft. They would wedge it in there tight and that would hold that rock from coming down. They mined that all the way up.

Then on the contract. So much for breaking, so much for mucking, and so much for timbering. The most was timber. They got $1.40 - I don't know what the stopes got paid - they got paid by the foot.

When I first went they had ore and D ore. D ore wasn't near as rich ore as the other and they called it D ore.

BRENDA: So it's lower in grade.

ERNIE: Yeah lower in grade. They called it D ore. Then you had your waste. Then when I went to work at the Con t hey had big cars - they called em the seven ton cars - actually they'd only hold about, most of the time, three or four ton. But it actually was a seven ton car. Then they had a fifth wheel on them on the one side. When you'd go out to dump it you'd go up over a ramp, the little wheel on the side would go up on that and you could open the whole half of the door on that side of the car to dump it in the chute. They had pockets on the station. The pockets went down into the shaft...they had a chute down there...they had two station tenders who worked what they called a skip. It was a bucket - a big long bucket that they put on. It had one deck on it - they'd fill that with ore and they'd hoist it up on top and dump it...they'd run out with this trolley motor along top and they'd dump it in these bins and the railroad cars would come along underneath them and they'd dump them into the cars and take them to Anaconda.

ERNIE: The decks, some of them had three decks and some of them had four decks on the cages for the men to ride. when they lowered them in, they'd take the skip off and one deck off and put the cages on. They take the pin out and put the other on and they'd set them off to the side. They'd give a signal - each level had a different bell tone. They had electric bells, everything was electric and you'd pull them - that way you'd tell them what level you was on. On the bells, you want to go up, you ring the station number and the engineer would give you a squawk. You'd give him three if you wanted to go up or two if you wanted to go down and he'd send the cage down and you'd get on that and go to whichever level. When I was on the pumps I had to get off at every level and get the water samples and get on again. Each level had a different number. Say they was on the 28 hundred, you'd figure out how many long ones and how many short ones you'd give them. You've got more room underground than you do up top.

BRENDA: You said you had to do dynamite. Did everybody have to?

ERNIE: No, just the contractors.

BRENDA: Did they show you how to do it?

ERNIE: Well, you're supposed to know how. Usually you worked with somebody who knew what he was doing. The first time I went down though there I was scared to death - I was just a kid out of the CC's. First thing a guy did was grab an ax and hit the edge of the box and break it open with the ax. It scared the living hell out of you! They were all wooden boxes in those days, later they got the paper ones, they'd grab an ax and hit about that far (2") from the top and hit 'er like that and knock her off. You put about ten sticks in a hole and the first one you'd have your primer - you'd take a nail and put a hole in the first stick of dynamite, put your primer in there, lots of times you'd have the fuse tie or the electric type. Now the fuse type you lit with a match, electric you set off with a battery. Most of the time when I first went to work they was all fuses - no electric. That's what Stanley (Bates), Jim's uncle, got killed with, was electric. The dynamite went off premature and killed him and his partner both. They had about four that year that they killed. The two Takia? brothers, they got blew up - one of them lost his arm and the other lost his sight, but they lived. But there was one set at the Steward, they was working at the Travonia - they got blasted and there was two at the Leonard got killed and Stanley and Richards who was working at the Con got killed. They got killed in '46. I was away at barber school when they got killed - otherwise I'd a been with him.

BRENDA: That would be scary.

ERNIE: Well the thing is so many of them got killed. I know one night we quit at the Con, we was going up and the guy said, "Do you mind helping this guy?" They called him something like Ziegler. Anyway they said he was trapped back there, so we went back, me and this other guy, we had just quit so we went back with the shift boss. The way they were doing it there was a big open area that they had stoped it out and cleared it. They put up posts, but they hadn't blocked it off or nothing. There was lagging al around him and then between the bars, the ore kept coming down you see. You couldn't stop it see. He kept pleading for his life. I'll never forget that. There was nothing we could do. We finally had to wait and then we got him.

BRENDA: It crushed him?

ERNIE: Yeah. I seen a lot of 'em. I was working one time with this guy on a motor at the Steward, next day was April fools day. He went to work at the stope and there was a slush and his partner was way up above, drilling or something. He was way down below running a bucket with a slusher. Somehow it hung up. He went back to see. His partner came running down and said, "I need help, my partner's hurt real bad." So we run and got a timber truck to put him on and we got the stretcher. We went in and we got him out and he was dead. The rock hit him in the head and he was dead. So we got out to the station and the old Superintendent come down and he looked at him, just like you'd look at a dog. "Well he's dead, you might as well take him up." I was so God damned mad I jumped off and grabbed a piece of steel. I was going to kill that son-of-a-bitch, but my partner jumped off and grabbed me and took it away from me....I'd of really hit him with that steel. I'd worked with the guy the day before and he was from up around Red Lodge. He said, "I'm getting the hell out of here. My wife ain't getting my insurance. She was getting a divorce and she wants my insurance." April fool. My partner thought it was an April's fool joke, but I said no, this guy don't stutter.

So we went out and he was already dead. You're not supposed to touch them if they're dead. They call a doctor to come down and pronounce them dead. The doctor gets a new suit and $100 just to come down and pronounce them dead. It's cheaper to hire a new man than it is to make out the papers on an old one. So if they got killed, that's the way they looked at it.

A days pay was $6. It might have been $5.75 when I first started, then we got a raise to $6.75...I was making $9 a day in the drifts and that was more God damned money than I knew what to do with. Well you'd go to the store and buy $10 worth of groceries and you couldn't haul them all in a little wagon or sled. I liked the drifts the best because they was on the level all the time. The drifts were nothing but a tunnel, they called them the drifts.

...it was easy to get fired. If you didn't make a round or something the boss would say, "Get er when you get on top." The first time I got fired I was working at the Leonard and my partner Ollie Spears...he went in the Army, so they sent another guy and he told the boss that he heard he was easier on the men. The boss said ya, that's what I told him, so that night we went out and we dumped four little cars, they dumped over awful easy. He said, "You guys clean that up and you'll get overtime out of it." Well, we cleaned it all up and he fired us. That's the way they was. If you didn't make a round, you was gone.

BRENDA: How did they choose the bosses?

ERNIE: Well, they go to the School of Mines and take the laziest ones they can get. They know all the angles and they are so damned lazy they wouldn't do nothing. Well, there were some good bosses, I worked with some good ones, but most of them weren't worth the powder to blow them to hell! Once in awhile, you'll find an old timer who was a good boss.

When a lot of men come here they worked under somebody else's card. What they did, they had a friend here who worked in the mines, he'd give them the number of his card. Like mine was 85229. Each one of them had a separate card. They would ask you for your card. But they never checked. During the war they took your picture and they had to show that. You talk about those drivers (license) pictures, you should've seen some of them we had. Jeez they was terrible. They really did look like cons. They had guards and everything during the war and you had to show the cards and everything to get in. What else do you want to know?

BRENDA: Anything.

ERNIE: You never knew your partners name, everyone had a nickname. They called me Idaho cuz a guy said, "Where you from," and I said. "Idaho," and from then on everyone called me Idaho. Well, I think it's time for you to take me home.

BRENDA: Thanks, Ernie.