

**Saskatchewan Archives Board, Tape R-357  
Excerpts transcribed from interview with W.D. McKay, Estevan City Policeman  
involved in riot. Interviewed 2 September 1973 in Regina by Larry Johnston**

I maintained then, and I maintain to this day, that, having worked there, that the whole trouble with the mines was that they wanted a check-off man on the weigh scales to see that they were getting paid for what they dug. I have no idea how things were worked out in those days but I did say at that time when I worked in the mines – that was back in twenty-seven or twenty-eight – that the miners should be paid so that if the cost of living goes up, his wages should go up automatically. They held a Royal Commission on this thing for a whole winter after that, the winter of thirty-one I think it was. And they came up with the earth-shaking statement in the spring, after spending about – well I know that the people on the board would be getting about \$75.00 a day plus expenses, and they prolonged this thing all winter – and they came up with the earth shaking statement after about six months deliberations, that they should charge more for the coal. Well any two year old kid could have told them that before they started....

An entry driver, that's a miner who works in a room, he can branch off from that entry and open up a big room. It's a lot easier to mine coal in a big room.... You have to be a pretty precise miner to do this sort of thing, and those fellows were getting \$1.20 in 1927 for a ton.... He was able to get to keep body and soul and live pretty good. Those deep seam mines were not bad places to work. Then about 1927, 28, 29 they brought in boatloads of people from central Europe, and they were sent down to the mines, an awful lot of them, because they were miners. And they came in and down went the wages. They could get them so much cheaper, because they were desperate for jobs. Instead of the government seeing that they were getting paid at a decent fee, they were just left to the mercy of the mine owners. So they went and took anything they could. Consequently the wages went down to twenty-five cents a ton.... This is when the trouble started. As I say, I didn't know very much about mining coal or anything else in those days, but I thought that this was an awful way for prices to go like this, and the cost-of-living be such that they couldn't operate. And I think this holds true today, that everything should be based on the cost-of-living....

"Well the trouble started in the early summer, the Truax Traer Coal Company came in and they were setting up the big shovel strip mining operation, and the miners went out on strike, and the mine operators didn't really worry too much about it because not much coal was being mined anyway because it was summer.

But came fall, and that's usually when the busy season starts, and they didn't go back to work, and then there was a hassle over wages and the usual bickering back and forth, and the mine operators would offer a settlement, and they [the miners] wouldn't accept it, and eventually it began to look as like they wouldn't accept any kind of a settlement. If you want my own personal opinion, and I don't know whether you do or not, but this seems engineered by the money interests in the coal business, and that the deep seam mines were being wrecked by the strip operations. This is what I always figured was the trouble...."

"It bore it out, because later on prior to the riot, working nights on the police force, I would see heads of the strikers, Tom [Yuen], Scarlett, and Forkin and all those kind of characters coming out of the manager's house of the Truax Traer Coal Company, and 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, usually muled up and staggering out of there, and putting 2

and 2 together, I wondered often what they were doing there when they were supposed to be against these peoples. They never did do anything to the Truax Traer Coal Mine....”

The miners had paraded in Bienfait and all over the place prior to this. And the miner operators eventually had just about closed up the mines and said – that’s it, forget it, when you guys get ready to go to work we’ll open the mines. Now we’re all done, you see, what are you going to do now? So they paraded around Bienfait, and so what? It’s like parading out in that yard. If you want to parade there, alright, go ahead; and keep it going until you get tired. So in order to get recognition they had to get into a bigger center, which would be Estevan. And they got to cause some sort of trouble and get the thing known. This is usually what happens in riots and strikes of all descriptions. You got to recognize you’re going to have some sort of a furor some place. [If the police had not stopped them] they would have broken into every store. We knew they were going to break into the liquor store. The mere fact that they came after we had forbidden them to come was breaking the law. And they were armed for any trouble. They would have cleaned out every store in town I’m sure....

As far as the riot was concerned there was letters and telegrams went to the union people in Bienfait, where they had their headquarters, that they were forbidden to have a parade. We knew they were going to parade in Estevan and we had forbidden them to parade. And the Town Council passed an order and sent them telegrams to forbid them too. But they apparently never disclosed that to the miners....

The last union meeting was held by Annie Buller in Bienfait the Sunday before. She really flamed them up. They came in there, and we knew they had a bunch of shock troopers, about 50 shock troopers, who were fairly well boozed up on homebrew. We also knew they were to raid the liquor store.... They were to go and turn the contents of the liquor store over. They were the guys who seemed to be the spearhead of the whole thing.... They were really armed with all kinds of weapons, of course clubs and axes, and all sorts of things. And they practically overwhelmed us. There was only thirty odd policemen in the whole brigade to stop this mob. And consequently we had to start shooting. We started shooting into the ground to start with....

The parade came up there very slowly and vast hoards of cars and people and one thing and another, and women and children and everything else.... It was estimated at the time to be in the thousands, how many I wouldn’t say. But it was between two, three or five thousand.... They were a long time coming. But they got to the intersection of Souris Ave. and McCutcheon [Chief of Police] and I walked out there. We figured that the Mounted Police would come along with us, behind us. We walked from the Town Hall out to Souris Avenue.... We met the big parade right there and he ordered them to halt and disperse and go home. They became very angry and encircled us, and knocked him down....and I dragged him out of there. I never got hurt or hit. I didn’t know it anyway. I probably got hit and had some sore bumps later on. I don’t know when I got them or where I got them.

Then we found that the Mounted Police weren’t behind us, we were cut off, but I did get him back to the lines. Well he couldn’t walk, as they had hit him in the shoulder with a car axle, and knocked it out of joint. He suffered for months with that.... He got back up into the firing line, both of us did. They had brought with them rocks and they had these bridge washers about half a pound each of steel.... They got them from constructions

and one thing or another down around the mines.... We had just had a fellow by the name of Louis Logberg (sp?) just hours before the riot rake the stones off the intersection....with a garden rake. And just prior to the riot I went out and stopped him and said, "You better get out of here cause there's liable to be trouble." So Louis took off....

The strikers would run right up and pull their shirts open, shouting "Shoot me you son-of-a-bitch." And some of them got accommodated.... They were drunk.... They started throwing rocks the minute we got out of there and probably prior to that too....So they cut our lines and we couldn't get word out. We were outnumbered so bad we figured we were going to get snowed under. We eventually got a car loose and sent it out to bring these guys back in (referring to the RCMP posted at Truax-Traer mine.) They came in, this was under Inspector Moorehead out there, and he had a gang with rifles. And he came in round about town and lined up there here along with the rest of us, and he just knelt that gang down with the rifles. He wasn't actually a policeman, as such. He was an Inspector of Mounted Police but he was a soldier from India and he knew how to handle riots. And he just let fly with the rifles and consequently several people were shot, three of them killed outright.... We had been firing into the ground and these people wouldn't go back because they said it was all blanks.... The ones who got shot was when Moorhead came in with his gang of riflemen. He meant business....

[The fire engine was brought out] when I got McCutcheon back out of there and they went over there to hook it up. By the time they hooked it up I was over here on this side of the street, lined up here with the police.... There had been quite a bit of shooting.... When they were trying to hook this up it was terrible. Men were on top of that with axes trying to and then they did, bash that thing up.... I don't think they did get the hose hooked up. They were scare off and beaten up too....

You didn't even know there was anybody killed until the thing was over. That's pretty hard to determine.... We saw people that were hit in the foot or something like that, on account of these bullets ricocheting off the gravel stones and their partners dragging them away. We knew there was one or two like that. After one or two like that happened, well then the people started to disperse. In the meantime these bullets had sprayed out, and there was probably five or six hundred shells fired into the crowd and somebody was bound to get hit and they did get hit, from even a block away.... The inquest showed that they were all shot with forty-five slugs which could come from any Mounted Policeman's gun. We were not armed with that sort of weapon.... We had thirty-two automatics, that's all we had.... But when they got hit or how, I don't know.