

**Saskatchewan Archives Board, Tape R-326  
Excerpts transcribed from interview with Howard A. Babcock, local resident and  
mine cook in 1930s, interviewed 19 June 1973 in Regina by Larry Johnston.**

**The Conditions**

Well the conditions were very, very poor in the mines. The timbering was poor, there was a great lack of adequate timbering to timber the mines. The wages were bad. There were big coal cars, and a man dug out a ton and half or a ton and three-quarters in order to get credit for a ton -- to get paid for a ton. I don't remember the rate per ton, but it was very low.

And the conditions underground were very bad. There was a lot of water in some of the mines that the miners had to take out. And they weren't paid for removing the water. They were expected to put it into tanks, and there were few pumps in those days, and it was hauled out on the same track as the coal cars and dumped when it got to the top. They had a slack pit that they dumped it into. And the miners were very hard done by. They dug more coal than they got paid for and they were expected to lay the track into their rooms. And if the turn at the edge of their room and the meeting of the entry broke down then the miner just wouldn't get his coal out 'til he repaired it. They'd say, "Oh, the company man is coming, the company man is coming," but he never seemed to get there. In order to get the coal out, get credit for digging any coal, why they had to repair the track.

And the living was very poor. A good miner would make a little bit, but for the most part, the average miner, it depended on how many coal orders there were and such like this. The demand for coal and this. There was many people, by the time they paid the store bill, the store bill was taken off their pay, they were supposed to get, and by the time they bought their squibs, the black powder that was used for blasting, the carbide that was used in the miners lamps, by the time they bought all this, there was usually no take home pay. It was just an existence, they could exist. Usually this is true like the old song -- "You owed your soul to the company store."

The most of the mines were a company town, you lived on company property. If you were fortunate enough to get into a company house you paid so much rent for the company house, which was quite nominal actually. Included in this, if you were on company property, you were expected to buy at the company store. Their prices was higher, and if you had a few eggs to sell or a little butter to sell to the company store or trade for groceries you got a very poor price for this. There didn't seem to be any too much limit to credit except to a miner that they thought they weren't going to get the coal back out of. I can remember my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law going into Estevan. They'd get a chance for a ride to Estevan, quite often in a farm wagon of one of their relatives or one of the ethnic group in the area who were farmers, and they were scared to death to come back from town with the groceries they'd purchased more cheaply. So the women, in their billowing skirts of that day, and petticoats, they'd hang this all up around their waists with strings, they'd tie it all up underneath their skirts and walk into their camp. They'd be about thirty pounds heavier. And this was quite necessary because if anyone of the company stools, or employers' stool-pigeons, seen them bring it in, they would be reported and they would be let know about it and maybe even fired. And the mail-orders, they weren't allowed to put out too much mail-orders. If they could

buy clothing at the local store, they weren't allowed to buy shoes outside or anything like that. They had to get them out of the company store at the higher price.

And the health of the people was very poor. The women were run down from too much child-bearing and the youngsters were born under the most adverse of conditions -- usually with just a mid-wife or one of the neighbours in. There was no such thing as calling a doctor in those days. If you did call him you wouldn't probably get him anyway. Dr. Creighton was away in Estevan, and he didn't make very many house calls, except to the hierarchy and the employer types. They tried to keep a doctor in the hospital in Bienfait, but this was quite hard to do. Nobody liked the job, and nobody had paid, and nobody could pay the doctor. Sometimes they were paid off over a matter of years in things such as eggs and butter and things like this. Those that could scare up a little bit to pay.

I was mentioning about the poor health of the infants and the mothers. The mortality rate was awfully high among the young mothers -- in childbirth without adequate medical care; and the youngsters -- the lack of nourishment. If the mothers couldn't breast-feed them, I would say there was about one out of four reached the age of six. They usually died in childhood of childhood diseases. About three was the average life span of the babies. If they reached three they were fortunate and would probably make it on.

The living conditions were very poor, the houses were drafty, and they were just more or less tarpaper shacks. Take in the valley, there at Taylorton mine. They were down in the coulee to try and get a little break from the wind and the snow drifted over the surface and into the coulee, and it became enormously deep in the winter time. It did help insulate their barns and their houses, which was pretty well all one building. Most of the time they had a cow or a few chickens, and the women used to go out and sweep grain out of the empty grain cars that come in. And this was cooked up as a rule to feed the pigs or the cow or whatever they had. The chickens, or course, would eat it raw. And it was a very disturbing kind of life, a very low class kind of life, if you like.

My mother-in-law's house, for instance, there was a big family in there and two or three boarders. She made home-brew to try and keep things going. It was cold and drafty and they couldn't get much coal. They were charged a certain amount for the coal they got from the mines, what they couldn't steal. They used to steal the spills from the cars, and that, and tried to take this home, but this didn't make for too good burning. Often they'd change the baby's diaper, and it'd be frozen on the foot of the bed in the morning. There'd be ice on top of the water-pail, and even ice on the reservoirs, which was their way of heating water on the back of the stove. They usually had a wooden barrel of water in the house for drinking water, and this used to be frozen up most of the time....

### **Organizing The Miners**

And there was quite a class set up in the mine. The foreign element, who they tried to get to do the bulk of the heavy work, were Ukrainians, Slavics, and Lithuanians, some Russians and very few Scandinavians. And the boss types seemed to be mostly of British extraction and Irish, English, and Scotch. Mostly English and Scotch and there was also some Welsh. But for shortness sake we'll call them British from now on. And they got most of the best jobs. The area bosses, which was a certain section of the mine, tried to compete with each other, trying to get the most work out of the foreign

miner. And they sure did! Those foreign miners were just as hard as nails. Their diet wasn't that good, but everything they had on their backs was solid muscle.

They were a sort of left wing group these bunch of miners. The employer types in the mine, the mine owners and the mine managers, they played up the ethnic division between the miners and they tried to get as much work out of the "foreign" element, as they called them, which was the Ukrainian group mostly. And they tried to play one Ukrainian against the other. They would give him a little promotion, just if he could keep the rest of his countrymen in line, and things like this. They might pay him a little better rate or give him so much for being timber foreman in the area, things like this, just to keep the ethnic pot boiling as much as they could, to keep the animosity between the groups at a fever pitch all the time....

They held some public meetings but in this respect most of the halls and the boarding houses that were around belonged to the employer group, so it was very hard to get a place to meet. Some of the tactics they used were to have a meeting at a farm house of one of their Ukrainian friends, and they'd have the union organizer over there to talk to them. They'd have a baloney sandwich maybe, and a cup of weak coffee made usually in the wash boiler. Then they'd go back and talk it up amongst their fellow workers, the few that did not get out to it. But everybody couldn't leave because right away the boss would get suspicious and follow. And then the boss was pumping his stool pigeon types as they came back to work the next day to see what he could get out of them; or get out as much information on how the union was doing or things like this. But they did get a little support from the railway groups and such as this.

So under this type of atmosphere it wasn't too hard for anybody to come in and get them to rise up as a body. But the union that came in, the Mine Workers of Canada, were a left wing organization, to the point of practically being communist, I would suggest. But they did try to organize the miners. Which was an awful job, because these miners you must remember were living on company property, all under the eyes of company security guards, who were legionaires and people of this nature, and mostly of British extraction. And their attitude was – "We'll keep this foreign element in check and keep them working and keep them producing coal, because it's good for business and the mine owners will make money." They always cried that they weren't making money, that they had to sell the coal too cheaply and this, but they were making money off the sweat and brow and the austerity of particularly the foreign groups, the Ukrainian groups.

The miners had some sympathy from other people because not only were there Ukrainians among the mining groups, there were Ukrainians for example working for the railroad. There were Ukrainian farmers around there and close relatives, like White Russians and there were some German people. The German people that were there seemed to be quite industrious. They seemed to be able to take it, seemed to be able to live with a little higher level of wealth than that of the Ukrainian, but it wasn't too hard to convince them there must be a better way, and we'll form a strike and we'll force the boss into giving us a better deal for our digging of his coal. And particularly after the riot the railway groups came, quite some distance...partly out of curiosity and partly out of support for the plight of the Ukrainian and the foreign miners – the coal digger. There was quite a lot of solidarity amongst them as an ethnic group.