YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Coal Mining Project

Mining Experience

O. H. 587

THOMAS WALTER

Interviewed

by

Ellen Daniels

on

May 22, 1978

THOMAS L. WALTER

Tom Walter was born July 28, 1905, the son of James Walter and Rena Guy Walter. He lived with them while he continued in school. He did not graduate from high school; unfortunately he did not say when he quit school.

He married Edith Pearl Labus on April 16, 1927. They did not have any children. His spouse is still living but she has suffered from a stroke which she had in the past year.

During World War II, Tom was frozen in the mines. What this means was that during the war he was involved in producing a raw material that was badly needed in order to make the steel that was needed for the war equipment. This meant that the United States Military refused to allow a miner the right to fight in the war. He was permitted to fight the war from his coal mine shaft.

Tom was employed by the Kirk Dunn Coal Company where he was not only a miner, but a foreman. Since he worked in a small mine, the foreman was expected to do the same duties as a regular miner, except that if anything happened it was his responsibility to straighten out the error or mistake. He explained the workings of that mine as well as the names of other mines in the same region.

Tom is now retired. His hobbies include making miniature models of war ships(large and small and inside of a bottle), cannons, and he is now beginning to work with the different forms of steam engines. He had used different sized engines and was doing some inventing.

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS WALTER

INTERVIEWER: Ellen Daniels

SUBJECT: Types of coal, different mines and different positions held

DATE: May 22, 1978

D: This is an interview with Thomas L. Walter for Youngstown State University, by Ellen Daniels at 613 E. Chestnut, on May 22, 1978, at 4:30 p.m.

Could you tell me what got you started into mining?

W: My father started me in it in the first place doing pick work, digging our own coal. Of course, he worked in the mine too and that got me interested.

D: When you got interested in mining was it just for the financial end?

W: Oh, yes, to make a living. That was about the only thing there was in those days around here that you could make any money out of. There weren't any shops or anything. I was raised on a farm. If I had been raised in the city I suppose there would have been different work. That's the reason I got into mining.

D: Was it a family mine at first?

W: No, the mine was a company mine.

D: Do you remember what the name of the company mine was?

W: Kirk Dunn Coal Company and Coal Mine is what they called it. They ran a lot of coal there. I loaded coal, helped on mining machines and did just about everything. I laid track, ran haulage motors, which are electric locomotives, and set up timber posts.

D: What was the size of the mine that we're talking about?

W: You mean the height?

D: The height and . . .

W: The coal stem was around 3'10". It employed approximately 100 men.

D: Did it go in very far?

W: Oh, yes, it went in for two or three miles and then spread out I don't know how many miles further. We ran five hundred tons of coal from there a day for years. Then something happened to it; they got to hogging it, I guess, from people that came in there later and caved it in.

The water they got from up above was called No. 4 water and they just couldn't pump it. There was too much of it. The No. 3 water was the water that are the pipes and pumps up. That is the No. of the coal seam. No. 4 is another seam of coal above No. 3. The water is a lot softer, not as much sulphur. The No. 3 water has been known to eat the brass lining from a pump overnight. They put a lot of wooden pipes in to carry the water.

D: Because the wood could withstand it after all?

W: Yes. All of the pipes with a 6" or 8" hole in.

D: Did you have any special equipment when you started except for your fists?

W: Tools. Each miner had a two, four and a six foot drill, a thread bar--that is a bar of steel about one inch in diameter with threads on it all the way. The drill would fasten on one end with a crank on the other that you turned by hand. Then there was a box with threads inside that fit around the thread bar. There was a post that fit from the bottom to the top slate. That held the box; the drill and thread bar went through this post; the box clamped around the thread bar. You turned the crank until the first drill was in and then put a longer drill in until the hole was deep enough.

D: Did you have any special type of clothing?

W: No. We wore a canvas cap that held the carbide light that we used. It was a small, round, brass tank that held water. A small container on the bottom held the carbide. The water dropped down from the tank to the carbide and made gas that lit from a small tube in front that lit with a small wheel with a flint in it. My dad used an oil light that burned lard oil. It had a small wick that you lit and hung on your hat,

like a small torch. This was before the carbide light. No, in those days, the only thing was soft hats. Nowadays it's more hard hats and more safety precautions. We did things then they wouldn't even allow you to think about now.

D: What?

W: We had a lot of methane gas in the mine, and not too much air. There was a fire boss that went through the mine in the morning before the men went in. He would take a coat and fan the gas out of the working places. It would stay out pretty well while you were working during the day. Shoveling the coal kept it fanned out, but sometimes during the day it would light and burn out. We have had it light and go past us and blow trap doors out. A trap door is a door that opens to let the coal cars through. When shut, it forces the air on to the balance of the mine--about the same thing as lighting gasoline in a stove. You're supposed to have enough air to push it out and make it safe. We would just go into a room and burn it out and then go to work. Of course, you have to get down on the bottom and light it because it comes back over you. It will only come down; it depends on how much there is. If it's just a little bit, it'll come down about that far.

D: About two feet?

W: Yes, it'll come down about two feet, the gas, and then it'll go back until it burns out. It would go from here to across the street sometimes. It would be real hot in there for a while.

D: Was it an even temperature in there all the time?

W: Yes, pretty much I would say for about a half mile in; it would stay the same all year round.

D: Did you work in very much water?

W: No, not in that coal mine. I did in a shaft over at Callahan Mine on Depo Road. Five minutes after you got in there you were really wet all day and cold, but you had to keep working in there.

This was a shaft mine about 70 feet deep. We had lots of water in the mine and we pumped 400,000 gallons of water every 24 hours. The coal seam was about 50 inches high. We mined about two hundred and fifty tons of coal a day, No. 6 coal. This site is now the Salem reservoir, which furnishes most of their water. I loaded coal in the main entries and airways about five years. Some of the entries were awfully wet. Water came through the roof in streams. We put steel sheets overhead but it didn't help much and you would get

soaked putting it up. I would take out a cut of coal from the entry and air course each day, and the slate came loose. Then the machine men would undercut it again and I would drill and shoot the coal down again for the next day, then head for the wash house. In the wintertime, going about a hundred yards from the shaft to the wash house your pants would freeze and break where they bent at the knees. This is no joke.

Then I worked about five years as mine foreman for the same company.

D: Did you come out for lunch or did you eat your lunch in there?

W: Oh, no. You stay in there and keep going until you get done and your shift is over or whatever you figure on doing. They would come in and cut me with a machine right away and I would get everything done, then I would go. Sometimes I got home early.

D: What were your wages at that point in time, let's say in the 1920's?

W: They were about $7.50 and you had to make the tonnage to come to that. I always worked tonnage. I think you did eight tons to make a shift. You figured it out by the ton whatever it was.

D: Did you walk in there?

W: We rode cars in there.

D: Were all your cars always motorized from the beginning?

W: Well, they had an electric locomotive just like the engine on a railroad, only smaller, and it pulled cars in and out.

D: When you were going back a little bit later, when you were with your dad, did you ever use any animals or anything?

W: Oh, yes, we used mules. That was what they used first. In that same mine that was the way they opened it up.

D: Could the mules see in the mines?

W: Sure.

D: Because I had heard that mules were blind.

W: Mules are not blind. You had two steel rails fastened to wooden ties spaced about thirty inches apart. The mules would go in and out of the mine and their feet would dig holes in the soft

clay bottom until at times they would be knee deep. They would step in those holes every time.

D: How long did they use the mules?

W: Oh, we used mules up until the 1930's. In these small mines they used mules; in the bigger mines they used electric locomotive.

D: How did the Depression affect you and the coal mine where you worked?

W: Of course, that mine was done. They caved it in before . . . In about 1927 or 1928 they finished that mine up at Coleman. Then I just fooled around with these little country mines in the winter. I worked some at R. Thomas Pottery over here in Lisbon, Ohio

D: What were some of the names of the little mines you worked at?

W: Walter and Frank Ells owned a mine, the Ells Brothers Coal Company. John Chestnut, he was an old coal miner; he had a little mine. John Evert had a mine out at Rogers and I worked for him some. That was a machine mine. Actually they took the equipment from the Coleman mine down there. He was fixed up with that. Then Tom Howells and Roger Zeigler were owners of the Guilford Coal Company, located at the intersection of Depo Road and I72 at Guilford, Ohio, No. 6 coal. I was the mine boss for those 12 years. We produced 250 tons of coal a day, more or less depending on the demand for coal. We employed from fifteen to forty men. Coal was mined with shaker conveyors and was hand loaded onto the conveyors. They closed the mine about 1960.

There was a fellow named Merrich down by Malvern who had a fair sized mine. I worked for him a little while.

D: When did mining start to pick up in the 1930's?

W: Oh, about 1935, 1936, along about there.

D: Then you could start to work full-time again?

W: Yes. But I went back to mine in 1937 for the Callahan Mining Company.

Emmit and Bob owned the Wolf Mine. By the way, years ago there was a man and two mules and I don't know how many cars blown clear outside. There was gas in the mine and there was an explosion. I never saw that or anything, but I heard about it when I was a kid; I heard them tell about it.

D: What mine is this?

W: The Wolf Mine.

D: Where's that located at?

W: Outside of the Erie Railroad track towards Niles. Coleman's is on the left side of the creek and this is on the right.

D: Coleman is located exactly where?

W: It's about a mile . . . Let's see, about a mile and a half above Logtown. Do you know where Logtown is?

D: Yes.

W: You keep going alongside of the Erie Railroad on the left side.

I worked in that little mine for Wolf after that explosion. I was all through there where they claimed to get these men out. The cars were strayed out clear across that road. The old-timers still remember that.

D: As time went on were there any safety regulations or state inspectors or federal inspectors coming in?

W: Yes. Well, they were just starting there. We didn't have enough men to bother with when I was there. I think they have a law now that if you have just one man they can come on in. Out at Guilford and Callahan's they had regulations for safety; they kept things pretty good. Oh, what is it they give you for safety? About eight years in a row we got an award for safety.

D: Did you ever have any problems working in the mines?

W: Oh, we had a lot of them. I don't know just what . . .

D: Within the mine as you were working did you ever come across some problems or something that was unusual as compared to the the regular?

W: Yes, we had a lot of bad slates that you had to watch awfully close.

D: Why did you have to watch slate?

W: Bad slate, it loosens up. Sometimes the air will loosen it and if there's water in it that'll loosen it too. You had to be careful when you shoot your way through or whatever. Sometimes you pick up bottom, to make your height; sometimes you shoot slate top down to make the height for the motors and cars. That sandrock at Callahan's would slip away; there was nothing to hold it. You didn't know where it was real good and where it wasn't. So you had to be very careful.

D: When you went through, did you use wooden beams?

W: In some places, yes. Timbers.

D: Did you use any steel beams?

W: Yes, we used a few of them in different mines.

D: Does that depend upon what kind of top slate?

W: Well, yes. Now at Coleman on the left side of the creek going north, the top was real good; it didn't have soft slate. Across the creek it was no good at all. As soon as you broke the slate a couple of feet or three feet, and as soon as the air hit it, it kept working. It would keep going up about fifteen feet high. Then it would start on the pillars and then start working, just like a drum.

D: Did they take any of the slate out of the mine?

W: Yes, oh, yes.

D: That would be, I assume, what they would use around here on walkways?

W: No, no. The slate from these little mines is no good. They just dump it over the hill. The sulphur balls and slate are dumped in a large pile and somtimes it gets on fire, spontaneous combustion. After it is burned this is called red dog. It makes a good, hard road.

D: Now you said sulphur balls. What are sulphur balls?

W: The real hard substance in the coal. Some of it is in streaks, but a large part of that No. 3 coal is flat maybe like the slate. Some of them are maybe thicker, all sizes; you just can't break it because it's hard.

D: When you talk about loosening the coal with the powder that you had, did you have to buy your own powder?

W: Yes.

D: Do you remember the cost of it?

W: I think it was cheap at that time--$5 or $6 for fifty pounds, if I remember right.

D: Was there any particular way in which you placed the charge?

W: Yes. At first the old-timers had loose powder. It came in a keg, and they used to punch a hole in it with their coal pick and it would pour out. Then take a wood stick and roll newspaper

about an inch . . . You could make it bigger; it depended on the size hole you had. You could make them different sizes. You could fill it up about a foot long or two feet, as much as you wanted to blow the coal down. Then they got stick powder and that was better. It came all wrapped up in wax paper. We used scribs at that time. That's a little thing like a straw with powder in it and wax. It had a wax end on it and you would stick that . . . Well, after you tamped the hole up you had a copper needle, and you put your powder in there and then you put your needle in. If you have two guys, one can sit at the very end and throw dirt and the other punches it in, then when you pull the needle out there's a hole. You then put the scrib in and light it.

D: Now to make the hole did you have a drill?

W: Yes. You have a four foot drill and you have a six foot and a two foot drill and then a thread bar. Then you had a box you put on, and this gadget would lock over the threads; you turn it in, take it down, and put the others in. Then you have your hole deep enough. A lot of time I used to put the breast auger drill in; that's a piece of iron that comes around you, enters the thing with the hole in it, then you stick the handle in there. It had two cranks on it and a drill at one end and then you push.

D: You really used your stomach?

W: Yes. They call it a breast auger. I don't know why, it's a stomach auger. (Laughter)

D: I was going to say that it's like the old-fashioned drill that the carpenters used to use.

W: Yes, that's the same thing. Only we used to make them ourselves.

D: You said that you had moved up to what we call a foreman's position. Why did you say that is was different to the foremen - in the larger mines?

W: Well, these little mines, you see they can't afford to pay like they do in the big mines. They don't have enough production so the little boss has to take care of the whole ball of wax. He's the electrician, the mine boss, and the track man. When you have trouble with the track, you have to fix it. When you have trouble with something else, you have to fix that too. A lot of the time we had plenty of help, but the coal diggers, they're pretty rough on the bottle and they don't work steady. Just when you need them, you don't have them.

D: Coal diggers, are they the same thing as coal miners?

W: Yes, that's it. Coal diggers, we call them diggers.

D: When did you finally retire from mining?

W: In 1961. I went to a machine shop from there.

D: Was there a great change from mining in the 1930's and when you retired?

W: Oh, yes, quite a bit. Everything changes.

D: In what way?

W: Oh, they have different machinery. They have a machine that goes right in the coal mine and digs it; you don't even have to shoot it. And then they timber different. They have big, hydraulic jacks that they put up and then set up another set over here, pull these out and let that fall in. They take all the coal and everything. Jacks are moved after the slate falls in behind.

D: Did you take all the coal when you were going through?

W: We did when we were at Guilford. We had to because of the clay bottom. You just shove it right down, take it all out and let it fall and it would not squeeze you.

D: Did you work in little rooms when you were . . .

W: Yes. about every 30'; it depends on how wide you want your room. It was around a 24' room, one on one side and one on the other. Of course, that depends on what kind of an entry you have too.

D: Did you have many air shafts coming down to you?

W: No, we didn't. We only had the main entry and the one air shaft leading in. I suppose a mile all together. We had some gas wells out there but there was no gas in the mine.

D: In other words, these gas wells are set separate in another area?

W: Yes, well we had one of them or they did before I went there. It happened to have two casings on it; it's still the same. So I welded it up and cemented it up. The rest of the gas wells that we were looking at had a good surveyor.

D: In surveying, how do you survey a coal mine?

W: The same way you do outside.

D: Okay, in other words, when you're under with the surveyor . . .

W: They're marked in the roof. They put a little wood plug in the roof and put a wooden thing in there and then you make the map

of that. And then they make a map when they get home.

D: So after they make the map, do they then go on top and measure it?

W: Yes.

D: To the same place exactly?

W: Yes, and if they know what they're doing they'll hit it right on the nose. This fellow that surveyed the gas well didn't know much.

D: Yes, I would say so. Now going back, you said that you lived on a farm. Was it a large farm or a small farm?

W: Oh, there was about a hundred acres in the farm, I imagine, when my dad worked in the mines.

D: In other words, the farm wasjust secondary? The main concern was for the family and food.

W: Yes. The mine was under the farm actually out there at Coleman's.

D: So really you owned the mine almost?

W: No, we didn't own it. All we did was run the farm.

They got a nickel a ton at that time. At five hundred tons a day, the landowner was really making money.

D: Oh, yes, definitely.

A lot of areas are mined out. Is that the reason why they're going to strip mining do you think?

W: Well, yes, there's lots of coal around, but it is down deep. There's a lot of good coal back where Coleman was, by the old McKinley home. On up by where . . . Do you know where Art Tritten lives?

D: No, I can't say that I do.

W: Anyhow, you know that the road goes back to Route 172. That's all solid No. 3 coal way out and it's good coal too.

D: So that would require a shaft opening?

W: Yes.

D: This No. 3 coal, when you said that it was good, what did you mean?

W: It's hard; it's no good for steam; it makes too much junk in the air. There's a lot of sulphur in it, makes clinkers. I don't suppose they would use it unless they had to. About every thirty feet there was a vein going up [No.] 6 and 7, which is good around here. Not very thick, but good coal.

D: And that would be coal that wouldn't leave out too much pollution?

W: Yes. I would say No. 7 would be the best, except there's only a couple of feet around here that I know of or maybe lower than that, 18".

D: So that's why it's more profitable to strip mine it?

W: Yes, if it's up closer to the surface. I guess they strip some deep coal now with those big shovels; I don't know how deep they do go.

D: That one from St. Clairsville?

W: Yes, that would be one. It takes as much as a house.

D: Was the coal miners U.M.W., was that going back in the 1920's?

W: Yes, that was going on way back in the 1920's. I remember they had a strike in about 1922 or 1923 and I think that's what has killed the union around here. Westpoint, they had a mine down there too. The same company that owned this, Coleman owned that.

D: Why do you say that? What happened?

W: Well, it just starved them out I guess; they went back to work at Coleman, nonunion. I think they did down at Westpoint too. They just wouldn't pay any more money and things got pretty rough and it ended up they didn't have to pay anymore. That's what came about over there at that lake. Then they tried to cave it in and it wouldn't cave. It just squeezed and they got all that No. 4 water in there and lost their mine.

D: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

W: No, I can't think of anything.

D: Sometimes there are some wild tales. Did the miners have some tales too, like about their mines?

W: Well there were some of them, yes. I don't know what I could tell you. I could tell you a story about a mule that was there one day. Would that be all right? I was back in the mine with that little mule. I was just working to hitch her on the car, and when I hitched her she was gone. Well, I didn't know that.

I hitched her on the car and when she came through the harness she left me and the harness sitting there. I suppose she went five miles around until Walter Ells went and got her. She went right through all those harnesses just as hard as she could go. Just as soon as she would turn around she would go. But we got her back in and I worked her for about a couple weeks and I didn't have any trouble with her after that. We would give her some chewing tobacco once in awhile; they like tobacco. They'll go up in the room and get it out of your pocket if you have any in there.

D: Now when you were in the mines did you have any difficulty when you ate?

W: Oh, yes, there were certain things that you couldn't eat, like ham and different things that would give you heartburn.

D: Did you have to ever take anything down with you in your bucket?

W: Oh, yes. You got into a bad area of powder smoke, nothing much helps, just to get out of there.

I could tell you about the new timbering. They bolt the roof up. Now they have big roof bolts and they have a machine that'll drill a hole whenever they want it. The bolts expanded on the end, tighten it up and it holds the roof.

D: Other mines?

W: Yes, this fellow down here, Ed Catlett, has a mine. He has a pretty good operation down there. He has those big diggers and he has shuttle cars. Instead of having track, it's a rubber tired machine and it has belts too that bring the coal out. Some of the guys might be able to give you some pretty good stuff. That's the newer way of mining. That's where they use those roof bolts. They have a place as big as this with no timber running in and out. Bolts are different lengths.

D: Yes, this would be about 14', wouldn't it, by about 8'?

W: Yes, but it takes about 28' to turn one of those big machines around. They have to have bigger space that's why it takes the roof bolts and they have to have a good roof too.

That ain't for me. (Laughter) I went down to see the mine when they first got these machines. They have a big strip along the hillside there, 15' wide. They start right off at 15' wide and they had several places marked along the way. Well, that scared me. I wouldn't even go in. I used to go in all the mines. We make our entrance well up on Brookwood, 8'. I think they want them smaller than that but we cut them 8' and that's not very wide.

D: No, that's not.

W: Bringing the cars out you just don't have much room on either side, still the roof could fall in after the air hit it. That's why if we had these roof bolts back then--they're bolted up and they stay there.

D: You said you didn't have much air, did you have a fan?

W: A fan, yes. We had a big fan, a good one. Well, you had six thousand, I think it was, cubic feet. At the last breakthrough you didn't have these inspectors on your tail then.

D: Was this a state inspector?

W: Federal. State too, both of them make you nervous. That's a good idea. Those people have to have air.

D: When do you remember the state and federal inspectors coming in?

W: Probably about 1955 or 1956 somewhere in there, but if they didn't have fourteen men you didn't have to pay much attention to them. Of course, they could make trouble for you but you didn't have to do everything they said. They came in one day, this is a couple of years before we quit, and we had fifteen men. Usually we had more men than that but a lot of them were drinking and we never had over fourteen men. This day we had fifteen, so he had us. We were under his jurisdiction from then on. They could do some dirty things too. They were all right; they probably saved a lot of lives, made it better for the people working in there.

D: Brookwood Mine?

W: He bought that from Tom Howells and I think they called it Brookwood. Then I worked over there a couple of years. If you're going out there, it's on Route 62. There's a lot of new houses and then there's a sharp turn. There's an entry right under the road there; you won't believe it but it is. What didn't I tell you?

D: Now that was called what mine?

W: Brookwood. Homer Callahan owned that. He bought it from Tom Howells. Later Tom Howells started this mine at Guilford, where I told you where the gas well was. I went out there to work for him later, so I got mixed up with all of them. We ran a lot of coal during the war out at Callahan's, about 150 tons a day. We hauled fifty some cars of rock out of there every day. Besides what they would shoot down in the entries, slate fell along the haulage road every day.

END OF INTERVIEW