

Bob Gemmell

Date of Interview: 2008

Interviewer: Margaret
Cook



I did everything from surface hand to horse riding underground, rope riding.

I started in 1941 on the surface of Rylance No 3 at New Chum. I started on the surface because you weren't allowed underground until you were 16. I was only 15.

When I turned 16 I went underground. Then I was rope riding and horse driving. Then I was contracted on the coal, shovelling coal with a mate. I think we used to shovel about 12 ton a day.

It wasn't too bad. We were young and pretty fit. After that I joined the navy for a couple of years. When I came out of the navy I worked at Westfalen, Dinmore for 3 or 4 weeks. Then I got a job sinking a tunnel at Aberdare East. I was on contract at Aberdare East.

I left there and went to Whitwood Colliery at the top of New Chum. It

was called New Chum but it is not there anymore. I was studying for my Deputy's ticket at the time and my Manager's ticket.

I got my Deputy's ticket and went from there to get my Manager's ticket, 2nd class. I then went to Rylance No 6, out near Swanbank.

With my second class ticket I got a job at Rylances as Manager of a little mine behind Saint's football ground, Rylance No 5. I was there for 3 or 4 years then I went to Cornwall mine out Blackstone way. I went from there – I was Manager there – to Aberdare No 8 as an Under Manager. I was there when the big creep was on and we lost everything.

Interviewer: What is the big creep?

That was the collapse of all the workings. At the time they worked so many seams under each other. Once it got unstable it just collapsed

and went right through the whole area. Luckily no-one was underground at the time.

There were two Deputies – Billy Manders and Reggie Woolly. They heard it falling and they came out along the return airway.

This would have been in about 1956. I had come from Cornwall to Aberdare.

The creep was underneath the racecourse. It dropped the racecourse in one place by about three feet. Aberdare No 8. went out under the racecourse and out under Blackstone bridge. They worked Aberdare No. 6, just across Bergin's Hill Road. They worked a couple of seams. Aberdare No 8 worked another two seams.

When the creep happened they finally went along the top side of the creek and drove down the main road towards Bundamba School. They went up under the main road and went up to this side of Booval Police Station and right out across to Blackstone Road (not quite as far as Blackstone Road). What happened then was the 74 floods. The floods came up the main drives and that was it. The mine closed. They filled the tunnels in. A few truck loads of coal stone.

Before I went to Aberdare I was relieving Superintendent of the

Mines Rescue station at Bundamba. There was a chap there - Bill Owens. He died. They wanted someone to look after it until they appointed someone. I was only there about 5 or 6 weeks.

From Aberdare I went to Whitwood Colliery. They were mechanising that. While I was there a job came up at Southern Cross for Mine Manager. That was the job Beres Evans left to go to Fox Rannes factory. I was there 11 years - 1968 to 1979.

I left in 1979 to become an Inspector of Coal Mines for the government. That didn't pay very well at the time. After a couple of years I joined Normy Rule at Rosewood at Oakleigh Collieries as Manager. I stayed there until I retired in 1984. I was 58. I am almost 82 now.

I have seen quite a big change from pick and shovel to mechanisation. When I say big change - we were hand boring holes for explosive and shovelling 12 ton a day for 6 to 7 hours. The continuous miner can cut 12 ton in one minute.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what a rope rider does?

Well the seams they dip. The rope rider generally has 4 or 6 skips and pushes them over the incline and down to the next seam, the level.

You hook the empties off and hook the rope on the full skips and the motor driver hauls them up the incline. It was quite an interesting job.

I was horse riding at Rylance No. 3, which was a shaft mine. I used to take the horse down the horse tunnel every morning and up after the days work. They hooked sometimes 12 empties up and pulled them along the levels to the miners waiting on them. If you hooked 13 up they wouldn't pull. You would hear the flicking of the couplings and they wouldn't move. Honest. Ask any miners who drove horses.

Interviewer: What made you go into mining?

My father was a miner. My brother George was a miner. My other brother was not in the mines. He went into the railway workshops. He was a moulder by trade.

Interviewer: It was in your blood?

Yes it probably was. It was a good life. I suppose it as dangerous at times but you could get knocked over crossing the street.

Interviewer: Did you have accidents in your time?

Yes. I got hit by coal up at Oakleigh. They thought I had a broken back but it was muscular. I

was off work for 2 or 3 weeks. The sides collapsed.

Interviewer: You worked in a number of mines. They all have their own character. Were some better to work in?

Yes. Whitwood Colliery was alright but at times it was hot, very hot.

When I worked at Cornwall we were down, vertical 1200 feet. Cornwall's out along Redbank plains Road, through Blackstone, and it was an incline mine. We were nearly out at Strollers cricket ground when it finished.

Interviewer: Were some of them wet?

Some were, but not too bad. At Southern Cross No. 11 we were driving out to the right from the main bit. It was pretty wet with water coming out the roof. You had to give the men rain coats. Uncomfortable.

Interviewer: What did you wear underground?

When you were on the coal you just wore a pair of shorts, safety boots and a helmet. Sometimes in hot workings some men used to wear women's panties, silk ones. They were cool. Not that I ever did. It was pretty hot at some mines.

Interviewer: You generally made pretty good friendships at work. Are there some miners you would like to mention?

I had an overman at Southern Cross - Nugget Mills. He was one of my best mates. He bought a piece of land to retire to down the coast and get out of the dusty black holes. He went to the coast and died after a couple of years of cancer. He was one of the best I can think of.

He was a good miner. We were in the rescue brigade together. I was in the rescue brigade for about ten years.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about the Mines Rescue?

A good bunch of blokes. One time we got a call. I was working as a Manager at Rylance No 5 at Ebbw Vale. They rang one Saturday afternoon and had a fire up at Normanton Colliery at Rosewood. It might have been a Sunday afternoon. We had to put our proto-suits on and go down. There was smoke and we found the fire and sealed it off.

Once you seal it the fire goes out. We sealed the main tunnels and once it was out they knocked them out and went in and sealed around where the fire was.

Interviewer: Then they could open it back up?

It was three or 4 months before they could. Another time we went to Aberdare No 9 at New Chum. They had a fire in the air shaft. It went through 2 or 3 seams and there was a fire in one of the seams. So they had to fill that shaft in with ashes. We sealed the bottom with bricks enough to stop it. They opened it off and sealed off the area and got it working again.

Interviewer: Was it usually fires you got called out for?

Yes. I wasn't in the brigade when Box Flat blew up. I had a back operation. I had a collapsed disc from falling over at Aberdare No. 8. Not long after I went out to Southern Cross I got operated on and then I resigned from the brigade in 1969. Box Flat blew up in 1972.

Interviewer: The Box Flat fire must have had an enormous impact on the industry?

It did. Actually I was Manager of Southern Cross at the time Box Flat blew up. Daryl Rheinhard was working there. He was a miner driver. He was killed. Andy Haywood was killed. He was the open cut examiner out there. Lenny Rogers. He was the Manager at Southern Cross No 10. He was killed. I knew all them.

As a matter of fact in 1972 that morning of the night they were

killed – the rescue brigade used to play golf up at Rosewood. 9 or 10 of us would go up there. Andy Haywood was one of them. Daryl Rheinhard played. You can be lucky or unlucky. Morrie Tait (a member of the Mines Rescue) lived at Booval. He was at the coast for the day on the Sunday. He came home and passed the rescue station and he saw all the lights on. He said to his wife “I’ll ring the station, there might be something wrong”. He was told there was fire at Box Flat. They said put your overalls on and go down there. The next morning it blew and he was down there.

Interviewer: Because he had gone out to help he lost his life?

Yes. Although if he had been home they would have got him out there.

Interviewer: What training did you get?

You would meet every Tuesday night and put a protosuit on and if you didn’t go to a mine you would walk around the racecourse. At times you would go to a mine. Different mines.

Interviewer: So were you all miners and volunteers. Were you paid?

We were volunteers and I think we got 30 shillings a practice night. If we went out on the job to the likes of Normanton and one time we had to go right underground at

Blackheath looking for a fire you got paid. Not a lot. It was quite interesting work.

Interviewer: Were miners well paid. How did it compare with the railway workshops where your brother was?

Yes they were. At the present time the money they get in central Queensland it is unreal, terrible. My son-in-law at Gordonstone Mine at Emerald on a long wall operation, one week he got a \$700 bonus above wages. One week.

Bonus came in – not straight away – with mechanisation. The bonus did eventually creep in. Bonus out at Southern Cross when I was there it was supposed to be one of the best paid bonuses in the district at that time and it was only about \$50 a week.

Interviewer: What did you do as a mines inspector?

I went around the mines checking for favourable working conditions. Some of them would be hot. Some would be dusty. After Box Flat stone dusting to prevent explosions had a big bearing on the operations. I had 6 or 7 mines – Acland at the Darling Downs; Torben Lea (just outside Maryborough); Haenke mine; Whitwood; Oakleigh and Mt Elliot. A few.

Interviewer: Did you check books as well or just conditions?

Not the cost of running the mine. If they wanted stone dusting freshened up you put that in the record book and took a couple back with you to the office. The inspector was not a hatchet man.

Interviewer: It would have been good for you because you had been a manager.

Well I knew all the managers around the place. Donny Livermore was at Haenke Mines. Johnny Matthews took over from Donny Livermore.

Interviewer: What difference did mechanisation make? Did numbers of men drop enormously?

Yes. Take Rylance No. 3 – the New Chum Mines. We called it The Chum. The men working there got 150 ton a day. At the shaft in wagons which held about 1500 weight. 150 ton. At Southern Cross with the continuous miner, you would cut that in ten minutes.

Interviewer: So how many men were working at The Chum when they were doing that sort of haulage?

40 or 50. Out at Southern Cross I had about 100 men there. I had 2 tunnels – No. 9 and No. 11. No 11 went over the top. You fed the coal from No. 11 down the shaft and on

to the main conveyor belt coming out of No 9.

Interviewer: You only had one conveyance system. That is efficient.

Out at Southern Cross you would probably get 1200 or 1400 ton a day. New Chum was hand wheeling, horse winding, rope riding up the shaft. One skip at a time up the shaft.

Interviewer: Were you there in the 1950s when the industrial action was on?

I was in the navy at the time of the 1948 railway strike. I think it went for about 8 weeks.

The next big strike I was in the tunnel at Aberdare East. The Unions said we were allowed to work because we weren't producing coal. We were driving a tunnel through stone that would employ miners once ready. So we kept working.

We used to live in New Chum Road and the truck would come round with sugar, tea and cabbages. Strikes didn't do any good really. I suppose you should have unions. But some of things I've seen and some of the things they went on strike for were totally stupid.

Interviewer: Did you go to social things they used to do – the picnics and dances?

We were married in 1949 and from February 1952 we lived here (Bundamba). I didn't have a car and they had the miners trip to Shorncliffe in the train. We had 3 kids at the time. We walked from here to Ebbw Vale station and catch the train to Shorncliffe. The wife had sandwiches cut and cordial in a bottle for the kids. We used to have races down there. Foot races. Coming home they would be tired. The kids would be whingeing and we had to walk home from the station. The train was packed.

We had functions in the National Hall at Booval, but mainly the train trip. I forget when that stopped running.

Interviewer: But you went most years?

3 or 4 years. A lot of miners got cars and they didn't go on the train. It fell through.

Interviewer: Tell me about being a Manager?

Some of the blokes were quite good. Some were hopeless. When I took over the job as Manager I used to say to the men I'll never ask you to do something I wouldn't do myself.

Interviewer: Who were the mine owners you reported to?

At Southern Cross it was Derek Cribb. He was actually the General Manager of the company. They had

No 9, 10 and 11. The office was over at No. 10, near Swanbank Lake. Straight opposite the power house, across from Box Flat.

Interviewer: All your coal went straight to Swanbank?

Our coal got carted by truck around the lake to the washing plant at Southern Cross No. 10. It was cleaned there, sorted out and taken by conveyor belt to the power house.

Interviewer: Was it clean coal or dirty?

A bit dirty. There were stone bands through the coal seam. If you got a seam of that only had about 10% reject – that is quite good. The bottom seam at Southern Cross was pretty good. The top seam had about 20% rubbish.

To go back, horses underground was a big thing. At New Chum they took the horses underground every morning and brought them up every afternoon. At Whitwood the horses stopped down there all the time.

At New Chum they had a horse keeper who looked after the horses and they had the best of chaff and what not. They had 6 horse drivers at the time. We would go down to the stables and ride them across to the horses tunnel. It was quite interesting. We brought them up at night time. The shaft came up like

that and the horses tunnel came up – two connecting seams. You hung on to the horses tail to pull you up. When you got up near the surface you had to run around to the front because if he saw daylight he'd be gone. Then you'd drive them to the stables.

When I came out the navy in 1949 they were preparing the shaft at New Chum. It was collapsed in one section. The timber had gone and they had to fill it in with ashes. Dig it out and re-timber. When I came out of the navy the company had to give me a job back. But I couldn't be employed there so I was sent to the other mines to see if I could get a job, and I could come back when it was working. I went to Westfalen at Dinmore and I didn't stop there long. I got a job at Aberdare East and never went back.

Interviewer: Why do they fill it with ash?

To stand on. They timber so much and dig more ash out. Send it up in buckets and timber more. It was slow work. If they didn't fill it with ashes you couldn't stand. You can't stand in mid air.

Interviewer: So you would work your way down, taking ash out and timber till you got to the bottom?

The shaft was 450 feet deep. You would have two cages – one going up and one going down, driven by a

winding engine. I suppose they would be 12 or 14 feet wide. Maybe 6 feet wide.

Interviewer: How long would timbering take? Months?

Not months as they would have put three shifts on it.

A lot of seams around here are close to the surface. But they are pretty dirty. With the washing plants you can get 1000 ton an hour out of an open cut in a day. You might only get 400 ton of coal.

The open cuts don't compare with the big drag lines in Central Queensland. Down here they had scrapers, bulldozers, loaders. They could move a fair bit of overburden – that is the rocks and that above the coal seam. They re-worked a few of the mines around here.

Interviewer: It was profitable because of the way they could mine?

The pillars would be underneath and they would scrape them. A lot of times a dozer would fall in old workings.

Interviewer: The existing mining leases were still operational?

Mining leases, not sure about now, you would take a lease for 20 years.

Interviewer: Did many people make the transition from underground to open cut? Or was it totally different people?

No. When the company started open cut they called for tenders for the removal of the overburden and there would be two or 3 blokes with bulldozers etc. They would tender. They wouldn't be in a union. They were on contract.

The blokes would come in with their dozers and scrapers and charge so much per cubic metre for removal of over-burden. That would leave the mine employees (the union blokes) to remove the coal.

Interviewer: Did you work on open cut?

No I was underground at Southern Cross and Oakleigh. We had a little open cut going at Oakleigh.

Interviewer: When was the last underground mining in Ipswich?

Southern Cross didn't close until about 1985 and it was underground. Westfalen at Redbank was flooded and they pumped it out. It closed after 1984, 1987 or something like that.

Interviewer: Are there any other people you want to mention?

Dougie Bailey. He was Superintendent of the rescue station. When I was an Inspector of

Mines I was based down at Bundamba, near the High School. One morning there was a big bang, early in the morning, about 8.30. I didn't take much notice of it. Dougie Bailey took an oxyacetylene bottle out to discharge it and it exploded and took his right leg off. They sent it down to a laboratory in Brisbane where they filled it full of methane. They used to have methane at the rescue brigade. They had a box and they would test the safety light in the methane. Apparently they filled it with methane and there must have been some oxygen still in it and when he opened the valve there was some friction and it exploded. They had to amputate his leg.

When I was at Cornwall I had a man killed. When I was at Southern Cross I had three men killed. At Cornwall Henry Clark died. I was on afternoon shift and a section collapsed and buried him. I was out there all night and we found him at about 6.30 in the morning. He was killed straight out. Then you get a phone call in the morning to tell you there has been an accident at the mine. Brian Pocock has been killed. He was on top of the continuous miner bolting up and a slab of roof came down. Two years later a phone call in the afternoon - two men were killed. They were sitting alongside the rib and the rib came over and broke their necks.