

Colin King

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



I was born in Killarney, Queensland, on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1939. I stayed there until I was 14 year old. At that stage I had already started working in the coal mines. I was on the surface. I used to unload the wagons as they came up and do all the surface duties. I was too young to go underground, I had to be 16. I think it is the same today.

The next year when I was 15 Dad decided to move to Ipswich. I started working at Box Flat. I was still too young to go underground so I worked on the surface mostly emptying wagons and working on the picking belt. Then I went underground as a rope rider in 1955.

Box Flat was a different type of mining than they had at Tannymorel. They had done away with contract mining which was all done by hand to the scraper loaders. When I went underground it was only on rope riding, looking after pit bottom.

Then I graduated to relief on scraper loaders at number 6 mine. Box Flat had three mines, numbers 5, 6 and 7 all with scraper loader units. Then after a period they changed from scraper loaders to mechanical mining which was mechanical loaders and shuttle cars.

Then they introduced the AB coal cutters which prepared the face for shot firing and loading out. This was at no. 7 mine.

Then I became a permanent fixture on the roof bolting. There was a group of three of us and it was all done by hand at that time. We had to stand on stools to drill the roof and then put the roof bolts in. At first they were what they called split ends. The roof bolts had a split in the end and you put a wedge in it and you belted it up until the wedge spread out enough to hold. That was pretty hard work.

The other two men were Alec Drewett and Jack Kemp. They are both still alive. Alec lives in Mackay and Jack lives at the Gold Coast. After that they got a roof bolting machine. It was called a Fletcher. It did the roof bolting. We didn't have to do it by hand. It was all mechanically drilled and then they changed the roof bolts from the split ends, as the machine couldn't use them anyway. They used an expansion shell. So there was a roof bolt with a screw on the end and an expansion shell and it spun and the shell expanded out.

This was quicker and easier.

After that they got the big roof bolting machine which was manufactured by Joy. We were working in the Bluff seam in no. 5 tunnel up to 16 feet at that stage so we had a platform on the boom of the machine. It lifted the crowns up. We put wooden timber on the roof bolts. Initially with the roof bolting you would put your bolt in and two of you would stand on either side and hold the crown the third one would put the nut on the bolt. It was hard. Then we got to the stage that the machine would put the crown up and you'd bring the bolter in and it would drill through the crown and insert the bolt and it was there.

*Interviewer: So they had jacks on the machine?*

Yes. Then you'd spin around and do each end the same. Then you'd put up the leg supports which was mandatory

at that stage. We got away from that later on. That was for a number of years.

I decided to do some more study. This was where my leaving school at 14 meant that I had to go back to school again. So I got my Deputy's ticket and then my Under Manager's ticket. I would have liked to have obtained my First Class Manager's ticket but that was a little bit more difficult because by that stage I was married. I had three kids.

Then I worked as a Deputy at Box Flat. I used to do the pre-shift inspections. At that stage there was no dog watch, just the day and afternoon. The day shift deputy had to pre-shift the mine. There were two of us. The other one was Jim Hill, old Pim. We did half the mine each and we looked after the panels during the day.

*Interviewer: What did checking it out involve?*

It involved checking the roof supports that there had been no movement overnight and checking for gas. Sometime it meant starting pumps if there was water. We didn't have much time as we only had an hour and a half prior to the shift to do this. Then we had to come back to pit bottom and ring through a report that everything was ok and the men would come down and everything would go on from there.

I did that for a quite a few years but after a while I was offered a job at Blackwater. I went for an interview. It was a development mine at Sirius Creek. Kaiser Steel from America had it. At Box Flat there were 6 or 8 of us that had Under Manager's tickets so I decided to get some experience. I went up there and it was fairly hazardous. I was involved in a gas ignition that landed 6 of us in hospital for a week or two with burns.

We were using a raised borer. We were going to put in ventilation shaft, before we put the other one in by hand. They drilled a pilot hole to the bottom and took the drill off and put on a 6 or 8 feet wide cutting head and pulled it back up. It reamed and pulled all the stuff out which we shifted on shuttle cars at the bottom. We went through an aquifer half way up and it was like an underground creek. It was running down and turning things into slop and we couldn't get it over the loading point. We decided to get the oxy-torch and cut the loading point and widen it out so the slop would go in. Unfortunately while we were doing that the hole collapsed and all the methane gas that had built up under the reamer was forced down and went over the live torch. What saved up was that it was so wet and we had no coal dust. Some were burnt more than others. I don't know if it was my Mines Rescue training but I fell to the ground in the mud. When I got up I couldn't see. I didn't know the mud was all over my light. I had burns on my hands and my

face. The Deputy had pretty serious burns. We got to pit bottom and rang the surface and they sent help. The Inspector came out and he and the Manager went down and there was nothing there. All there was was the oxy torch. They took us to Emerald Hospital and put us in isolation because it was burns, which was the children's ward. They gave us a bottle of beer and a cigarette each day. That doesn't happen these days.

Fortunately we all got over that. The mine up there was only a single entry. One development tunnel and in that tunnel was the belt, the rails beside it and the ventilation in a big tube. I don't think you're not allowed to do that now. You have to have a second exit these days. There was a vertical shaft that went to the bottom that was 1200 feet. We did all that.

I'm not sure what the reason was but a job came up at Box Flat as the Under-Manager in charge and I thought "Oh well I've been away a couple of years. I'll apply". I got it. I came back and I finished up in charge of all those I'd left.

*Interviewer: Did that work?*

It did work out ok, except the following year we had the Box Flat explosion. I didn't have a lot to do with that. I was away that weekend and I didn't know what was going on with the fire. I know the aftermath of it all. After that when we got through that

little period they started number 8 mine. This was only being developed as the main producing mines 5 and 7 were closed off. So they decided to put off most of the people. They were relocated to other mines in the district. There were three single shifts as we had no-where else to expand at that time. There was the Manager who was Warren Brown, myself and Alwyn Grulke. Warren, being Manager, got the day shift. Grulke didn't mind doing dog watch, so I took the afternoon shift. I did afternoon shift for 5 or 6 years, straight. Grulke left in the meantime and went to the Mines Rescue as Assistant Superintendent. We didn't have a Manager on Dog Watch after that, so I had a Deputy do that.

As we expanded we developed it out and we got a couple of units going. Warren stayed on day shift. It got to the stage that Warren went to Westfalen as Manager and I was offered the job as Manager. Even though I only had a second class ticket I could still look after thirty odd people and we still only had three single shifts. It worked out as 31 with me, so we were ok. So I looked after it for 6 years when they closed. That was what happened at Box Flat.

Do you want to talk about the differences in mining? That was my experience. I spoke earlier about roof bolting. That was phased out in the mechanical mining side of it. The continuous miners were introduced. The miner had drilling rigs on the side

and shuttle cars for transporting the coal. That was developed into a number of units which did away with a lot of the hand work. After the continuous miners they got the FCT (Flexible Conveyor Train) which was a continuous miner connected to an extendable belt. The belt would be over the top of the normal trunk belt and as you went in the belt would follow. It was on rollers. It was getting back to continuous mining. As you went the only thing you had to do was put up the roof bolts. They had done away with most of the timber and they just put up roof bolt with straps and butterflies or plates.

*Interviewer: So there no legs in the way?*

We had done way with all of that. That was pretty hard to get people to accept that. I always remember that we always kept props on the top side for ventilation as you had to have the bag for the air to go in. On the bottom we just had the bolts and did away with the props. You'd go away at the end of the day shift and in the morning all the props would be back up. This went on for a while until we could convince them that there was no real advantage in having the props. They were there mainly as indicators rather than as having any real support.

*Interviewer: But they did like that indicator as people said the creak was reassuring.*

That was the main thing. They had that FCT working and this was in the new

mine, number 9. Then they decided to close up shop. For what reason I really don't know. I think it was largely political but we won't talk about that.

So then I went to Collinsville. I found that quite good actually. It was what they called a system called wonga willy. The mine had already been developed and they were on the retreat. They would drive a road out with a barrier of coal probably 10 or 20 metres and drive out to the lease boundary and then take all that back till it fell in.

They had horses there. They were really good. I had never seen the horses. They were really good for relocating cables and stuff off the machines. You'd disconnect it and hook it to the horse and he'd go round the pillar and then you'd hook it back up. They had sleds so the horses took the roof bolts down. One story about the horses was when you knocked off. If you said knock off they took off straight the surface. They knew where to go. They were well treated. They were members of the Union. Collinsville was a union town and they were treated as well as, or better, than the men. They had people look after them and the horses went on compo if they got a scratch and they couldn't go underground.

I was going to stay there but they opened a new mine at Middlemount called Southern Colliery. It had not been developed. It was in the planning stage. I went and had a look and said no as Collinsville was good to me but

they kept annoying me. It was a new mine which I hadn't done and it was long wall mining and I hadn't done that. So I decided to go for the challenge. The strange thing was that my Manager, Under Manager in charge of me and the other two Under Managers at Collinsville all left after me and I became their boss. The Manager went to Central so I didn't have control over him. We drove that mine which was pretty flat, there was very little gradient. We developed the long wall and I have never seen production like it. We had some trouble union wise which we always did. People were worried people would lose their jobs.

With automation, the long wall was all automated, we ended up with six in the crew, but they really weren't needed. People might challenge that. If it was set on automation as the shearer cut past the chocks would automatically come across behind it and you would do that for the complete panel. The panel would go out a couple of kilometres and the long wall face would be 200 metres. It would run the whole 200 metres and the amount of coal that came out was phenomenal and you just kept doing that till the whole block was mines out. The biggest challenge there was once you'd finished. It all fell behind as you went. The first challenge was to get it to fall and not have too big an open area. This happened with the first fall. It was like a football field and when it came down it blew everything. We knew then that we had to do smaller bits or put in explosions to start

it off. The problem at the end is you have to take the chocks out. It was all done by big machines, not a lot of manual labour. The hydraulics were 3000 psi and you have to be really careful as it could cut you in half. That was the experience there. I worked there 9 years and then I retired and came back to Ipswich.

With the timber support methods, initially there was no roof bolts, it was just timber. It was mostly just props with a timber across or roof supports they had. I mention the split ends and the expansion shells but they then had chemical inserts. You put them up, spun your bolt and the chemical would expand like concrete and take the support. They were quite successful. They did away with props.

*Interviewer: You talked about the men's reluctance to do away with props but did you at all times have confidence in the technology.*

I did. I'd been to seminars and been to other mines in NSW that was doing it. The younger ones didn't mind. They were willing to accept change. Older people get set in their ways. They didn't want a change. At Collinsville they only put in bolts right to the end and once they started to come back right at the end they had an indicator prop that was 16 feet high and it was like a clothes prop as it bent they saw how far they could go. The miners were remote controlled.

The FCT at Box Flat was remote controlled. You didn't sit on it to drive it. The machine was cabled to the miner and you had the buttons and you could drive it. The driver isn't under the area where the machine was working. The only problem was if it broke down someone had to go and repair it. It did break down and right in the worst spots.

At Collinsville when it fell it always went back to the front of the miner, it didn't go further. I said I wasn't going to run but I couldn't just stand there because when it started to fall it would blow and the reaction is to run.

## **Tape 2**

That was my worst experience, except from Box Flat.

*Interviewer: The aftermath of Box Flat must have been hard.*

The hardest thing was that some people on the dogwatch that went down the week after the explosion (we had the week off) two of the men who went down had brothers killed in the explosion. It must have been terribly hard for them. They went back. I still see them occasionally. There were other people who were there that night would have more to tell you. The worst thing was telling the families. As there were no bodies recovered, only parts, there were no funerals just memorials. We had a week of that which was

difficult. To their credit the other miners went on and we expanded to two tunnels.

*Interviewer: It is incredible really.*

It was. It was something we never thought would happen of course. I still don't really comprehend that day as I have been in mines where they had fires. In the Mines Rescue I went to Rosewood where they had fires and worked on putting up brick stoppings. Never in your wildest dreams do you expect it to go like that.

I joined the Mines Rescue in 1964. The Superintendent at the time was Bill Owens and he used to teach us at the Technical College. He more or less, when I was studying for the Deputy's ticket, got us all to join the Mines rescue to widen our experience. I was there until I went to Blackwater as a member. When I came back I used to do the competitions and watch all the others panic as they were doing their bit. I would be a caretaker over the weekend if someone wanted to go away. They had the telephones hooked up to home. I did that for a while. Once Box Flat finished and I went to Collinsville and I wasn't involved.

*Interviewer: The Mines Rescue sounds like a close-knit group of men.*

It was. It was great. We still have a set-up with the Mines rescue. There are quite a few that meet at Cooneana, where we have a display. There is

another at Ross Llewellyn Motors, the original Mines Rescue Building. Booval was the first station in 1909.

I was part of the Miners Union. You had to be. Even Deputies in Queensland are part of the Union. In New South Wales they are mines staff. I was a Secretary at Box Flat until I became a Manager. I was also the State Auditor for the miners union known as the QCEU in those days (Queensland Colliery Employees Union). There were two of us and we went through all the books for the mines across the state.

*Interviewer: That's a big job.*

It was. It took us a couple of weeks to do that.

*Interviewer: Was that a paid Union job?*

You were compensated for what you lost at work. In those days (about 1964) there were 64 mines in the Ipswich-Rosewood area. There were lots of little ones. But there were a lot of mines in the bushes.

The railway had a loop line that went from Bundamba and round to Redbank and it serviced all the mines. Some mines would only fill a few hoppers a day. Box Flat was pretty big and it would have a train load.

They used to have a miners picnic each year. It went to Scarborough. The miners started at Bundamba at the racetrack and it would do the loop line

and come back and then go to Scarborough for the day.

It was organised by the Union and a train load would go. They would have sports and things for kids. A lot of the men went to the pub. A big day.

*Interviewer: There was a Union Christmas party too?*

They had them up to 5 or 6 years ago. They had a miners dinner in Trades Hall in Ipswich. It was run by the women's auxiliary of the miners' union. It may not exist anymore. The main union office was at Booval where the National Hall and the women's auxiliary was part of all of that. They would help if people were sick or injured. They ran a dinner every year which was paid for by the miners union. All the old ones got together. Ivy Willy ran that. They used to do a good job.

*Interviewer: They had welfare role?*

They did. I don't know if you heard of stay in strikes? There was one at Caledonian and that is where the Women's Auxiliary would set up on the surface and prepare meals to send them down. I think there was a few that snuck out for a cigarette! They weren't supposed to leave underground. I was never involved in one.

Southern Cross had trouble before they closed when the power strike was on.

Flo Bjelke-Petersen took scones below ground.

*Interviewer: Did you have union problems at Box Flat?*

We never had a lot. Most of ours was discussed. We had monthly meetings which they could come up an hour early and be paid for by the company. If it extended too late into the afternoon shift after their hour they had to go to work. If the meeting went longer than that they could stay all night. Any grievances they had they came and saw management and most of the times it was all fixed up there and then. National Strikes they had to abide by. If the National Union in NSW declared a National Strike all mines had to be involved in that whether they wanted to or not. We didn't have a lot of industrial problems.

*Interviewer: Box Flat seems to have remained a family company and didn't change that much.*

One thing with Box Flat in the early days before I went away I think there was a period of 12 years where there was no new staff. In those days most people working in the mines were there for the duration. In the early days people moved around as there were that many to choose from but Box Flat was always fairly progressive with their mechanisation and things like that. The people who came there were more or less a younger group and there were no retirements or anything.

*Interviewer: Had it changed when you came back?*

It was alright. Box Flat was sold to Bundaberg Sugar which was a pretty big company in the end. While it was under the control of McQueens it was more or less a family company.

*Interviewer: Did you deal directly with Bob McQueen?*

Occasionally. He rang me a couple of times after he retired. He lived to 96. He had a few problems along the way. His first son was killed in the war and Johnny had a silver spoon, I think. I met Bob's first wife. They had parted but she was still part of the family. He rang me a couple of times after he retired. He lived at Bribie Island.

He ran trips, when I was fairly young, to Maryborough as he had an association with the Staffords who had mines at Howard and Torbanlea. They'd run sporting days – rugby league and that sort of thing. He'd always go on the bus with us not in his BMW or whatever, and joke and carry on. When he decided to sell out it was because there was no-one in the family interested in running the mine.

*Interviewer: That must have been hard for him.*

I think it would have been. Then Bundaberg Sugar took over. They were pretty progressive. Beres Evans was

Managing Director. I still tell him today that they made the wrong decision to close Box Flat. Box Flat was always on an incline and where we were working was pretty deep, we'd reached the stage where it was pretty flat. I said I've waited thirty years to get here and get good conditions and now you're selling!

*Interviewer: There is still plenty of coal?*

Yes but I don't know that it will ever be mined. A lot of people are against mining these days and it might be too deep anyway. Long wall mining would have been perfect there but it is under suburbia now. Middlemount was 30 miles from town in open paddocks.

*Interviewer: Can you describe the character of the different shafts at Box Flat for me?*

No 5 when I first went there, it had a supply tunnel. I think that was called 5e. The other one was where the coal haulage was, where they had the alligator and two wagons which passed each other half way up. It was steam driven. We were all steam at that time. They had a man and supply tunnel which is where they used to pull the wagons out initially with the coal and later the men would go down on it and take the supplies in. But that one caught fire. So they had to close that.

*Interviewer: That wasn't the big fire?*

No it was an earlier one. They had heatings all the time because the Bluff seam was pretty fiery. There was a band

in it that once it was exposed it sent the heat up. Where the alligators were they started a belt tunnel behind and it came out in the alligator half way down. The alligator was pretty steep to start with, then flattened out. It was a one in two gradient. Where the belt came out, that was flatter enough for a belt, grade one or one in ten. The belt was extended to pit bottom and that was the main belt and it was a wide belt. They took one of the wagons away from the alligator and just had one wagon that ran on the other side of the belt and it carried the men and the supplies down. They had them side by side for the last half of the tunnel. At pit bottom there was a big fault (it jumped up 60 or 70 feet) so they made a big bin. Then from the top of that was the main belt.

When I first started they had conveyor chains below, not belts. The mine hadn't been developed that long, but once they started continuous mining it developed pretty rapidly. They had those belts and the bin was used as a surge bin. If the coal was being produced quicker than it could be taken away the bin took the surge out of it. If the bin filled up it automatically stopped the belts. The belt through the surface was set at a certain rate or tonnage. It may have been continuous and it might not have been quick enough as they had three units working underground. The developed north and south panels and some were getting pretty high tonnage, about 100 shuttle cars a shift. The shuttle cars carried 7 to 10 ton. For there that was big. Those

gradients there weren't too bad. At pit bottom they had the haulage which went down adjacent to the belt tunnel and that was where the men and supplies went to the work places as they were down a kilometre or more.

They changed to diesel scout cars in the panels. They were diesel machines that carried the supplies on them. The seam was 32 feet. We tried to work the bottom 18 feet. They worked different ways. Initially, before mechanical mining, they'd go in with the scraper loaders 10 or 12 feet and they'd drop the tops (as they called it) up to 18 feet. So they left about 14 feet. There were stone bands in that and it was fiery. Sometimes it would collapse later on and that would cause problems if it wasn't sealed off properly.

With the continuous miner they would work the tops and then come back and take the bottom.

*Interviewer: Is that safer?*

I'm not sure. If you got the area where the ribs or sides would fall in, it wasn't. There was plenty of coal there. That was probably the reason why the fire started an expanded out.

No 7 was steeper again. One tunnel they put a stone drift at the bottom over to no 5 as that was a different seam. No 5 was in the Bluff and no 7 was in the Four Foot seam or the Wright seam. We called it the Four Foot. The other one we started

working as the Lagoon seam, which was below that again. That was no 9. The coal was hauled out of no 7 by a single wagon, self tipping into the surface bin. It was always small production compared to no 5. Then they opened belts in no 7 and they opened 7 main, adjacent to no. 7. They put an alligator in there. My father drove that one. It had a big bin as well and it was separate from the others. They developed no 7 and as they went down the seam got flatter and it got closer to no 5. It was always underneath or behind, but the difference between the seams, instead of 70 or 80 feet, was down to 10 or 12 feet. They were worried about that because that is where the explosion took place.

Then we went to no 9 and it was steep. They had to go down past the washing plant and with the lease boundary, it meant it had to be pretty steep to get down to the coal. It had to go down to clear any workings from 5 and 7. Once they got down it wasn't too bad but the coal quality wasn't as good.

*Interviewer: No 5 was the best coal?*

Yes. No 9 was developed and we took a stone drive that took us back up into the Bluff seam to get to good coal. That is where the FCT went and that was when they closed down. It was lots of good clean coal. The belts couldn't handle it. They had to close other sections down. If the FCT was

producing it would take up all the available belt space.

No 8 where I worked, that was where they started after the explosion. It was always accessible by diesel. You could drive down it. There was a haulage put down later on behind the power station on a steeper grade but what they used to do is hook the supply vehicle on behind the supply vehicle to put tension on it. It went down and it flattened out.

*Interviewer: How far down did it go?*

2 or 3 kilometres. We hit a faulted area and the seam jumped up and we went through it. We hit areas that fell into the Bluff seam. This area was out near Southern Cross. Actually Southern Cross area was part of Bob McQueen's lease. The power house was all Bob McQueen's doing but they had to have 3 coal companies that could supply coal. So he gave some of his lease to Southern Cross so there would be three companies that could supply - Box Flat, Southern Cross and New Hope.

We went right down to where Southern Cross was and turned right and we worked that area. We came back and put in stone drives to work underneath that area. The coal got dirty and we had some heatings as it fell through to the Bluff once.

I remember once where there was that big heap of Bluff and we filled for 2 days and didn't move. We just kept

loading the coal out. Whether we were supposed to do it, I don't know.

### **Tape 3**

We had the heatings at no 8 several times. We seal it off and leave it a month. We'd all go down and work at no 9 for a while. Above no 8 they were doing the open cut. No 6 was up there. It caught fire in the early days. When it cut through into no 8 it gave it an air circuit and I think a lot of the problems that we had in no 8, wasn't really problems in no 8 but smoke above us that came down. But as a precaution we had to close up. That was the time when they had the disasters at Moura.

*Interviewer: Your father was in the industry and your sons are in it?*

Dad (George) drove at Tannymorel. He was an underground haulage driver, what they call a main and tail. It was a flat area and they had half ton wagons and they'd bring out 24 at a time. The main and tail was that you had one rope at the front and one at the back. The one at the back to take the empties in and the one at the front took the full ones out. You have to have the right tension so that you don't pull them off the rails. He drove that. When it got to the bottom they could only land 8 at a time so on the surface they had another haulage that pulled them up the incline which wasn't very far, 100 metres or so. That was where I first started. They'd bring 8 up and then you'd send them back down and bring another 8 up. He

did away with the haulage driving as it looked like the mine was closing and he came to Ipswich. They did away with haulage and had diesel locos which Dad's brother drove. There were 6 boys in the family, most of whom had some go at mining.

He came to Box Flat and would relief drive. When the older drivers retired he replaced them and he got the big one at no 7. After the explosion we had to put Dad off as there was no work for him.

*Interviewer: That must have been hard?*

Yes it was. He went down to the brickworks and worked there until he retired. One son (Mark) is a surveyor at what was BHP (now called BMA – Billiton Mitsui Alliance) for 20 years. He was a cadet surveyor at Box Flat. He stayed on a bit after the mine closed as they had to finalise things. Bradley is an electrician. He did his apprenticeship at Box Flat. He has worked at Curragh in Blackwater, since Box Flat closed some years ago, as an electrician. Dad's father (Joseph) worked in the mines at Howard where Dad was born. Then they went to Mt Colliery near Tannymorel. There were 10 in Dad's family 6 boys and 4 girls. Mum's dad was a Mine Manager at Tannymorel and he died of mine dust – emphysema. He was only young. Mum was 12 when he died and 17 when her Mum died.