

Colin Webb

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



My name is Colin Webb. I was born in 1933 and I started working on the surface in 1948 when I was 15. I first started at Kruger's Sawmill when I was 14 and a half, and as soon as I turned 15 my father got me a job at Box Flat, and I went on the surface.

My father was a miner at Box Flat. So was my brother, and my grandfather was an engine-driver in the mines. I think they were around Newchum way. That's where it all started.

It was fortnightly pays. I think there were a few pounds. I just forget now. Beres Evans has got some books coming from Bundaberg with the Box Flat pays and how much, like, when you were on the scrape belows or whatever, how much yardage you'd done and all that. This was right from the first.

I was a pit top boy, on the pit top. When they brought the full wagons up, I'd let them down and sprag them, and then hook the five wagons on to go back down the tunnel. I used to let these wagons down. There was a quick winch, and I used to let them go down to the picking belt first off, at Box Flat. Then I'd pull five back up. They'd be there, you'd sprag them there, and you'd wait until the

others came up. If you had timber to load in between times, you'd go out and load your timber for what they wanted. I was working on my own.

At smoko or dinner-time, we had to make the tea for the blokes. They had their own billys and their own little container of tea. We played a trick one day and we took them all out to the wrong blokes, you know – boy, didn't they go to hell! Just these things, you know. We had miners in them days who were not short of kicking up the backside if you done something wrong. We had a few of them that used to do that. Them days, they were on hand boring, and they had the drills that used to, they'd send a bundle of drills up because they were from that long to six feet long. You'd take them down to the blacksmith and he'd temper them and sharpen them. You'd have to go down later and pick them up, and send them back down again.

You know, if you got one of these – it's all right telling it now, but you couldn't tell it then – if you got one of these blokes that give you a smack on the ear-hole or the whatsisname, we always had a file, so we'd get the file on the end and scratch it nice and

shiny, and send it back to them. These were things that – it's true, they went on all right! If they found out, they'd just about kill you. They'd say, "My tea's spilt," you know, "I never got any tea" – and half the billys, you couldn't put the lids on them, you know, they were all wrinkled and that, but that didn't make any difference to them.

I couldn't actually wait to go down below. When I went down below I was at the pit bottom, receiving the wagons, the empties, sending the full ones out. They had a pit bottom. Then they have a long road, what we call, and there's an engine-driver in there and he lets them down that way, and you've got another road rider over there, see.

They'd come in, and when you got 15 empties, you'd hook them on, bell him, and he'd take them in there and they'd distribute them round to the miners, see? You'd get rid of these 15, five at a time. That's how it went all day.

*Interviewer: So it was pretty constant. Wagons coming down and wagons going up all the time?*

Yes, it was all day. I was down No. 2. That was one of the early tunnels, and it was DC power. They had three lines running from the surface down, and along the long road was about, well, we thought it was about a mile to the next dip down. When they got 15 up the top here, you used to let them ride out along the road to the pit bottom, see, and you'd pull 15 back in again.

At knock-off, I've seen miners trying to get a free lift. They'd be on the top of the whatsisname, and these wires would be laying over there, and they'd be all wet and sweaty. I've seen them lift their back and next minute they're off the wagon and on the road, because they hit the DC and she's

– SSSSST! It throws you, see? Where AC grabs you. If you grabbed that and it was AC, you couldn't let it go, but if you hit it like that – SSSSST!

*Interviewer: How deep was No. 2?*

It was a fair way down. It would have been 700 or 1000 feet down. That's the first part I went down. I used to work of a Saturday. They used to call them tip-ups. We'd be cleaning coal between the roads and all that of a Saturday. You'd just write, "Tip up," on it, because that's already spilt coal and it was just the coal lying around. We used to work Saturday, or we'd work with the shift men miners, giving them a hand to put the props up and all that. You were just at a learning stage.

*Interviewer: What was your first impression going down? You were so excited. Was it scary?*

It was pretty dark, you know. The first time I went down below was with my father. I was only 14, and he had a carbide light, and every time somebody fired a shot, it went out. It's the blackest place you've ever seen. I had a box of matches with me, and we used to shake the light and light it up again, and away we used to go, sit on the rail line. You could hear. My brother was a wheeler for Dad and you'd sit on the line and you'd hear them coming and all this, and hope to Christ you can get this light going.

You couldn't do that today. It was all fuse and detonators then, you know, when we were on the scraper loaders. Then they brought in the pan system, which was scraper loaders. There was a tray there with a chain running up through it and they'd load it onto the pan system. You had a loader down the bottom with two drums on, and a rope going up and a rope coming back

on the scoop, like you see on the end loader and that. They'd take it up and back. Your mate was up the top there. If you scooped out that side, he'd shift the pin over. They used to drill holes in and put pins in, a big pin, square, about an inch square or something. They had a rope with a round thing on the front, and a knob on the back. You'd put that in the hole and the rope here, and you'd push it right into the hole, belt it with a maul (a big hammer, but we called them mauls). You'd belt it in until it got tight, and then you'd put the end of the rope on a pulley, because they had pulleys on them, into that hook.

And then you scraped all the coal out of there. Then you'd just keep shifting it over until you had it cleaned up. When they fired, they used to drill the top holes, and they got down, they'd drill the holes until they got to the bottom, because you couldn't reach it. Some of it was nine foot high, you know. That's what they used to do with that until you cleaned the board out. Then you'd drill more holes and the shot-firer used to come in and fire another bench, and it just repeated itself all the time.

*Interviewer: So when they're shot-firing, does everyone get out?*

No, it was pretty good as far as that was concerned.

*Interviewer: Was the noise incredible?*

Yeah, the bag would go like this, and everything shake like hell. There were some Ipswich City Councillors come down one night. We were on afternoon shift and they were having a look around, and they were down at the belt level and they were shot-firing up at the top level. They were there, and they fired. Next minute the bag's going like this, and there's one little bloke there

that says, "Where's that little hole we come down?" He's looking up at the surface. He wanted to know where that little hole was. He said he's getting out of here.

Not many people, I don't think, can take to underground mining, unless it's actually in the family or something. It was a good job. The pay was quite good and it just manifested itself from there. Then they brought in – that was scraper loaders – then they brought in loaders and cutters and cars and that. The cutter, that's one of the cutters out there, you used to cut it all along that way and down there ...

*Interviewer: So horizontally and then vertically.*

With the main cut in the middle there. That's the face and they'd cut it through there, and then they'd cut it down there.

*Interviewer: So they'd cut square blocks.*

The shots would be from there to the rib and then they'd be up above and they'd fire the whole face. Then these loaders used to come in and load it into the cars. The timber blokes used to come in and put the timber up.

*Interviewer: Tell me that timber story you told me about the first time you did the timber?*

They put me in with these two blokes. It was about 16 foot high. They used to roof off the ends of the timber, and they said, "It's your turn to go up." I said, "No, I'm not going up." They said, "You're going up, or I'll go and get the boss."

*Interviewer: You were about 16?*

No, I would have been in my 20s. They said, “You’ve got to get up.” They knew that I was frightened of heights, and the beggar on the controls can shake the foot and I’m standing on with one arm around here, trying to get the drill up in here, and hang on. Oh, they were laughing like hell at me. They got me onto the first one. I wouldn’t go on any more. I said, “No, I’m going. I’ll go home. I’m not getting up there again.” I couldn’t do the job because I hadn’t enough hands. I’m still the same today. I don’t like heights. Underground I can go, but not up. Even when I was open-cutting up in Moranbah and Dysart, I could walk to the edge but I could no more go down, crawl down the side if there was something wrong or something. You know, I couldn’t do it, just couldn’t do it.

*Interviewer: And you said something about putting in the props the first time. They have different sized ends?*

You know how a tree grows? There’s a bit here and then it gets skinnier? Well, that’s what you had to load on when you was on the surface and if you put them all big ends one way, they’d just pop out. Of course, you had chains to tie them on, but if you multi-end them, you’re holding on the two of them, see, and they wouldn’t fly out. Sometimes they would, but not often. You used to have – the crowns was the same, and the slabs you used to just load up and all that. We just took it as an everyday job.

*Interviewer: So what happened to you the first time you did it?*

Nothing happened. It just went over the ground and went – WHOOSH – spewed out. You had to go down and unlock them and put them all back on again. Actually, the bloke that was pit heading on the other side,

came over and give us a hand, “Well, I’ll show you how to put them on”. We didn’t know anything. We just threw them onto the wagons.

Being 15 year old, nobody told us. You just learnt. I was down on the picking belt for a day, picking the stone out, the belt going past and you had to pick all the stone out, you know. It was very educational, and it was manual work, which didn’t hurt anybody.

*Interviewer: You’d have been strong?*

I wasn’t too bad. I’m still here. But then they brought the continuous miners in, and all you had behind them was cars, and you had timber crews and that. I got the chance to learn and I took it.

*Interviewer: So you were a driver?*

Yes, I’ve driven it, yes. I taught Alan Berlin. We had a fall that would have killed him, no doubt about it. You relied on your mates that you were working with. I yelled out to him, “Jump!” and he’ll still say today “I’d have been dead today if you hadn’t yelled out, because if I yelled out, ‘Jump! ...’”

*Interviewer: They jumped. You didn’t say why?*

He didn’t look or anything, and a big piece of stone came in right where he was standing.

*Interviewer: You said you were involved in a fall when one time you heard it go, when you were on the miner---*

Yes, when I was on the miners here, I just happened to look back and I seen the crowns come down and they went back up again. And when it went back up, I went! Back

here was where the two side things were, and the bloke that I was with said, "Run!" and I run, but unfortunately for him, he fell over and I went straight up over his back and I just kept going.

*Interviewer: Could it have buried you?*

Yeah, it was the full size of the board. It would have, but the timber saved me, just got a bit of a bow in it. You know, once it releases, when you've got a big block – I've seen a heading down there. I think it was Seven Tunnel.

*Interviewer: What did you call it – a heading?*

Well, they used to drive boards; right? There were three boards or four head boards, like that and you'd have a belt road, intake road with timber, and this was a return. Now, you used to have to put headings.

*Interviewer: What is a heading?*

Well, a heading is from one section to another, so you drive this section in eight metres wide, virtually, and they're all driven in eight metres wide. Then you've got to put a heading up there to go to this. When you get this in far enough that you can put a heading in – this one's already driven in – you join it up, because this is the return where the air comes, and with the one down the bottom, you're driving down. There's another panel down the bottom.

*Interviewer: So they're for air flow?*

Yes. And coal, together. They're 100 metres apart, the pillars in them.

*Interviewer: How wide are these headings?*

It used to be 100 foot, and every 100 foot you'd drive one down, because you had to move the brattice in to keep the air flowing. All the waste, the air, used to go out the return and up. The fan on the surface used to virtually drag it down and you had to distribute it around wherever you was working. If you was working in this section, you had your brattice coming out along there, so the miner was working in there and you had 2m on the top side where the air used to come out.

We even had blowers, big blowers with 44 gallon drums welded together, and they had a rubber ring and a big blower behind it. So you used to keep adding them on. As the miner went in, you'd add them on, behind the props, so that it sucked some of the dust out, too.

*Interviewer: It's a complicated process, isn't it, air management?*

Yes. Well, not only that, it's for gas, too, see? See, Box Flat was a non-gassy mine all the time I was there, other than black damp or something like that in the headings that it used to get. We had one that every Friday somebody had to go with the Deputy up the returns to see if they were still open, you know. There was one place we used to go into, and you could feel the black damp pulling the hairs on your legs and you knew it was there. He'd put his light and show you how it puts the light out.

You'd go in next time and you could walk right up to the wall that was there. Next time it would be from there up to the roof - and the cockroaches could live in that. They're bloodless. We got up to the wall once and here's a big pile of cockroaches there. Yeah, they're bloodless, and they're the most cleanest – what would you call it – insect of the lot, because they're always cleaning

themselves. That's how poison affects them, see? If it gets on their legs and they're licking their legs.

We used to have to walk the return there. I don't know if it was once a month or once a week. I got to do it a couple of times and I didn't mind it. You get to look at the other stuff.

That's when I went for my Deputy's ticket, and Colly King was with me, and – I won't mention names – the Inspector, he failed us both first off. He said, "You don't know enough. Come back in three months."

So I went home and told Jean I'd failed, he said come back in three months, and I never picked up a book, never done a thing. I went back in three months and I done exactly what I done before, and I passed. But he was a tricky old Inspector, had a box for a gas test. He'd put gas in it which would naturally hang to the roof of the box, and you'd put your light up, and you had to tell him how much gas was in there. But you had to watch him, because he had a bit of a spike in the side with a fan, a piece of wood on it that acted like a fan. He'd give it a twist, and if you had your light right up, out she went. You failed.

Yeah, that's fair dinkum! I watched his arm, because a bloke told me to watch him and I dropped it out. I said, "Oh, about two percent there". "Yeah, righto." He asked all the same questions again.

I passed then. I finally got a job at Box Flat as a Deputy, which I enjoyed. This would have been in the 1960s as I was married in 1956. I had to get a First Aid ticket first, and that was in the '60s. When he failed me the first time and I went back for the second time, I said, "I'm not going to learn anything," but anyway, I got it, and I got a

job later. Kingy went about six months later. He done his through the College, but he went on to be an Under-Manager. I had no ambition of that, because I didn't think I was educated enough to do that, leaving school early. I didn't care much for school. I'd get into more trouble than you could poke a stick at.

At any rate, the Open Cut started then, up there, so I went. I was Deputying down below and the Manager asked me, "Why don't you go for your Open Cut ticket?" There was a bloke leaving out of the Open Cut, but you had to do six months, but they never told you how many times you had to do it, or how long you had to do it. It was a six months space. So I put my six months in, and he told me to go and sit for my exam.

Well, the bloke that was Inspector was sitting over there, and I was sitting here, and they've got a little book like that, the Open Cut Examiner's Book, and I said, "What do you want to know?" He said, "Everything." I had to start from the beginning of the book and go right through the whole book. It was about that thick. Never said a word, he didn't.

*Interviewer: He just sat and watched you write?*

No, this is verbal, all verbal. Any rate, I went through it and told him everything, and said, "How did I go?" He said, "You'll get word." Oh, he was a cranky old shit – pardon the word. He said, "You'll get told." I copped it, but luckily enough, I knew, I worked by that book, the same as the Deputy's book. I suppose I was a – you might as well say – a big shit at the time, because I wouldn't step outside the book.

I found that out mainly when I went North to Moranbah/Goonyella, where I was First

Examiner there, at Goonyella. I wouldn't step outside the book for anybody.

Yeah, they had nothing. Even if the Inspectors thought that it wasn't exactly right, I'd say, "It's okay. This is my opinion." I said, "If you think there's something wrong or I don't know, you write it in the book and sign it." Never had one do it, because they were putting their head on the chopping-block, too. I said, "No, I'm not going to do that. You do what you like". I just stuck by that.

See, hard hats had to be worn in the Cut at all times and you'd get electricians, fitters and miners who couldn't give a hoot about it. If I seen them I used to get up them. I even got up the Manager. He was the big boy, No. 1. He had a heap of Japanese tourists and I was doing the inspection around the walls, on afternoon shift, I was – it was daylight – and all these little Japanese got out of the bus and all walked over to the high wall. Not a hat amongst them!

I walked over to him, and I said, "Look, we've got the other blokes all wearing their hard hats, and you blokes" – "Don't worry about it, Col," he said, "I'll fix it up," you know. This was at Goonyella. The next morning a bloke come up to me and he said, "Gee, you've got a cheek!" I said, "What have I done now?" because this is what he used to say, because if I'm told to call a spade a spade, I called it. I said, "What have I done now?" He said, "Gee, you were getting up the boss." Then the penny dropped, and I said, "Well, he got out of the bus with 20 people and none of them had a hard hat on." "Yeah, but he's the boss." I said, "No, rules are rules. Stick by me and you don't get into any trouble." See? That was one of the incidents. I had a few of them there.

On the draglines, on the bucket, they had pins where you used to put a rope through, and a pin would go in and lock it. When the rope frayed, they had to change it, so we used to have to blow the pin out, you know. The blast foreman, he got me and we used to plaster explosives on the top, put a dent in it, and let it go to knock the pin out.

Three times we couldn't knock it out. The third time we knocked it out, and the boss and this other Pit Foreman and another were standing under the dragline where the driver sits. Next minute, the window falls out. Shock! He said, "Do you just realise tens of thousands of dollars was in that window?" They had to get it out from America. The Blast Foreman said, "That's your fault. You put too much on." I said, "Hey, who cut it? You!"

I came back to Ipswich from Moranbah at Christmas '73. The floods were in '74. I came back in November '73.

*Interviewer: That was bad timing.*

No, it didn't worry me, because I was working out in the Open Cut at Southern Cross. I'll tell you about that – but this one, we fired, and you could hear this – WHOOF, WHOOF, WHOOF – in the air. I said, "I'm getting under this truck." He said, "If you're getting under there, so am I," and we could hear it going WHOOF, WHOOF, WHOOF, back down.

Well, it went through the boards in the truck, a rock that big, straight between us. These are just things, you know, when you've had a bit of experience with this stuff.

You talk about the '74 flood, we lived at Blackstone and I had what was called a bush car, you know, an old car I used to go through the bush to work at Southern Cross.

Mum lived at Bundamba, just behind where Boetchers is now, we lived just behind the shop there. It had been raining for ages, and one Friday afternoon I went over to see how Mum was. She was all right and Bundamba Creek weren't up, and we went out to Leichhardt, and it was about 20ft under the bridge. So we went back home. I went to work on the Saturday morning through the bush and the cut was flooded. All you could see was about that much of the pipe out of the pump. I waited, and I waited, I went down to the cross-roads at Swanbank there to see if somebody was coming.

There was nobody coming, so I went up to the office at Southern Cross, and I rang the Manager, and I said, "Isn't anybody coming to work this morning?" He said, "Where the hell are you?" I said, "I'm at work." "How'd you get to work?" I said, "I come through the back road." He said, "Do you know that the creek's up to the Blackstone railway line?" I said, "No." A moment like that, I thought of Mum over at Bundamba, so I raced home and got Jean, and I said, "It's up to the railway line down there." "How's your mother?" I said, "I don't know."

So we headed over there but we couldn't get anywhere near her. We got up on top of the hill. Of course, it had about 7 to 8 foot off the ground, and it had 12 foot ceilings, and it was up to the top of the ceilings at Mum's place. I thought, "Oh what's happened to her?" And I rung the sister, and they had her. They'd got her out in a rowboat and it was two treads off the bottom of the house. Well, we couldn't get to it, but she was okay. So that was one of the things, and it still puzzles them how I got to work. I just come through the bush.

*Interviewer: So was work shut for awhile?*

No, we had to pump the mud. There was two of us, and we had to work 12 hour shifts for about three weeks to a month. We'd do day shift one week and night shift the next week. Just pumping. Just fuelling the pump up, and shifting it, you know. It took about that long to pump it out.

There was a lot of water. It was only a little pump. It wasn't a big pump them days – Southern Cross, they never had that big pump. But they had pumps up there at Goonyella that had tractor motors on them, like, dozer motors on them.

*Interviewer: How many men worked at Southern Cross?*

They had a couple of tunnels. Later on they went down into one of the Open Cuts and put a tunnel down there, a couple of tunnels. They got the surface coal. See, under 40m, over 40m is not really viable, and they put a couple of tunnels in, I think. I left there in 1969.

In 1979 I went to Norwich Park, Dysart. I spent ten years there, and then I retired. I had a car accident and busted my legs up. Then I left there in '88 – on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the 11<sup>th</sup>, I finished. I'll never forget it. I left them and we had a house at Brassall, bought it the year before. We bought a piece of ground there in 1986, and when we decided to buy the house I sold the piece of ground, and then '88 came along, my legs were playing up, so I went in to the Social Security. I had to go and see the doctor about going out on the Invalid Pension, and I got the same doctor that attended me when I rolled the car. He said, "No problems," and I retired in '88. So we've been living back in Ipswich since then.

*(End of Section 2 – Start of Section 3)*

I think the young people, you know, under 20, are missing out on a lot of life experiences without mining. I know it's dangerous, but what's not dangerous? You could drive out here and a truck hit you, you know, but I think they learn companionship in mines – not Open Cut so much, but Undergrounds. With the technology that they've got today with gas equipment and all that, and Mines Rescue, I think they've got a lot of learn, and they can learn. I know the companionship down below is just unreal.

*Interviewer: And lasts a lifetime?*

Lasts a lifetime, because if somebody said, "Go!" you didn't say, "Where?" or "What?" There was just one way to go out, and that was out.

Dad used to tell us that when they had the wagons and they were down at Two, sometimes they'd have two or three broads in the one section. He said this bloke was whinging about getting the wagons in his road that he couldn't get through and they were pulling pillars, I think, and they had a fall, and he knows he went the top side and his mate went in the middle, and he said this bloke was out there before them. He said, "You were whinging this morning you couldn't get through there." He said, "I never come through there. I come through there." He said, "No, I come through there." He went between the wagons and the whatisname, and he didn't even know it.

So they're just little things, you know. That's where I first at Box Flat saw a cuddy.

*Interviewer: What's a cuddy?*

They put up a heading. They have a full wagon on here, and the empty wagon down here; right? And they have a rope comes from there to there, going up steep like that.

They pull the pin out of there, and that runs down here to the end. In the meantime, it's pulling that up to the top.

*Interviewer: It's a counter-weighted pulley?*

Yes a, pulley. That's the full wagon, and it pulls up the empty. And the heading's going in here, so when they bring their full one out, they hook it onto here. This one's down here. Because this is heavier than that, when they put it on there, that comes down there, that goes up there, and they pin it. That's how they used to get coals out of headings like that. That was the first time I ever seen it.

*Interviewer: Were you involved in the Mines Rescue?*

Yes. I had about eight or nine years in Mines Rescue. I left it when I went to Moranbah, and that's when Box Flat blew up, and when I come back I went in for a couple of years because they had all new people. I knew Joe Spiegel pretty well and he said to come back just to be with the new ones.

*Interviewer: To pass your knowledge on?*

Yes. I just can't bring them to mind now, but I know there were three or four Captains in it, you know, and workers.

*Interviewer: They lost a whole team of rescuers didn't they?*

Yes, the Captain and the Vice-Captain and the team in between. I went to Wollongong with Lenny Rogers as Captain, and we were one heading short of winning the competition – 50 feet. We were trying to win one. We finished up winning one or two, I think.

*Interviewers: They were hard fought competitions?*

Oh, gee, yes, because you had so many sections, see? They'd hand you a paper and you had to answer all the questions.

Then there was a dress-up, and you had to put your suit and all that on, check all your suit and all that. Then there was the underground part of it. I think there were four parts to it. There was the written, the verbal, and the dress-up on your suit, and underground.

*Interviewer: And did you have to top all of them, or overall you had to top it?*

Yeah, overall. I think it was a point system. I went to Collinsville with Clarrie Wolski, the bloke that died later on from Box Flat. We went up there and we lost by half a point.

We knew we weren't going to win it, but we were told that we wasn't by the boss of the other in Collinsville. He said, "Youse won't win it, no matter what youse do".

*Interviewer: Really? A bit of politics?*

A bit of politics, yeah. The bloke that was doing it – without mentioning any names – he was the Electrical Inspector, he cut half a point off for a question, and he was the Electrical Inspector. See, you had to do certain things, and we lost by half a point.

But we got drunk that night. See, they didn't mix Managers and workers and where did we have the party? At the Manager's house! Some of the workers wouldn't go. Some of them did. We said, "All right for them to come?" "All right, yeah." We never got back until about 2.00 in the morning, and poor old Joe's having a heart attack, but it was just

outside of the normal thing. You went away there to enjoy yourself.

Ipswich really, in them days it was a very productive place, with the woollen mills and the workshops, you know. We've got none of them now. My Missus worked in the workshops and she said it was bloody hard work. There was anything from 3,000 to 5,000 people working in the Railway Workshops. And look at the apprentices, learning the trades and whatever.

*(End of Recording)*