

David Donald

Date of Interview: 2009

Interviewer: Margaret
Cook



David Frederick Donald born in North Booval in 1929 to Jack and Vera Donald – third of five sons. Dad was a building contractor and apprenticed sons 1 & 2 and suggested son 3 should find another line of work. I attended Ipswich Technical College as one of three boys in a class of 20 /30 girls.

An offer came from Mr. P. Roy McKelvie, Secretary of Aberdare Collieries Pty. Ltd., for a lad to start work in a coal mine office. So in September 1944, I began at the New Whitwood Mine office at New Chum Village (This suburb no longer exists). During my 42 years and 1 day with Aberdare, I worked on the records of New Aberdare East (Redbank), Aberdare Nos. 6 & 8 (Bundamba), Aberdare Nos. 7 & 9 (Dinmore), Aberdare No. 5 (Riverview), Aberdare Extended (Raceview), Lanefield Extended (Rosewood) and Cambria Collieries (west of Rockhampton).

Initially, Mr. Frank Wright (Mine Manager) gave me a lift from where Booval KFC is now to the pit office. Where were we? We were in this little 3-roomed office in the bush surrounded by coal heaps, noise and dust. Coal. Noise. Dust. My first duty was to make morning tea and then at lunchtime I was able to make tea again. What a wonderful start to my working life!

The office manager was Mr Jack Walker and he was very good to me in those early days. He said I had to call him Mr. Walker until I was 21. It was difficult to call him Jack when I did reach 21. I was told that I could come to work on my push-bike and I rode from Booval to New Chum in all weathers. 44 hours a week. I rode my bike to different sections of the mine site.

7/6d a week. Jack Barram was the caretaker. I never saw him and he got 10/6d a week, 3/- more than I did. Why? I still don't know why.

There was a lot of humour on site. One day the Manager phoned the pithead to send down the big "bludger" which was a really large hammer. Instead they sent down the Engineer/Electrician much to the surprise of the office staff. One of my duties was to take the pay to New Aberdare East through the bush on my bike with the money in a Gladstone bag with a .22 revolver in the bottom of the bag but no bullets!! It was during the war and you had to have a permit to get a limited number so they weren't wasted on the office-boy.

Next I was directed to work at New Aberdare East which was near where the Westphalen Nursery is now. Wonderful experiences over there. Once I was chased by a goanna on the narrow track;

I guess it was his territory after all. There was a picking belt at the pithead and the stone was discarded to be dumped elsewhere. There was an age limit for working at a mine but they seemed to be very young workers and, years later, we would find that they had put their ages up to gain employment.

The mines in the area were serviced by rail loop lines – from Bundamba, Dinmore and Redbank. Rail wagons were shunted in under the loading chutes and railed out when filled to local areas, to Tennyson Power Station and to Fisherman Island wharf for export. I didn't know much about the wagons but I had to get their numbers and put labels in a little slot on both sides of the wagon and then write up consignment notes.

Office work, typing, answering the phone on the wall. We had a coded system and had to learn the codes for the different areas. The pay sheets were done using pen and ink - this was long before Birs! I needed more skills and commenced a course with Hemingway Robertson by correspondence.

Another move, and this time to Aberdare Extended at Raceview. A brick building on the Cunningham Highway is all that remains of the Office of the General Manager, Mr Conway. It has been incorrectly identified as the Timekeepers office and also the Mine Magazine but why would you store explosives in a building with a fireplace? The general office in which I worked was about 16 feet west of the General Manager's office and the stumps are still there. Aberdare Extended had a vertical shaft – 600 feet to the bottom plus a 30 foot sump. The cage was two-tiered and I wanted to go down but the Manager said "Back to the Office." Mind you, I was very young then and the mine had a history of fires. That was the only mine of Aberdare Collieries that I did not go down. The main office was a separate building and was taken down in pieces, board by

board and transported and rebuilt on the New Whitwood pit site at New Chum. In all, that office had five shifts after it was moved there the first time.

Interviewer: Who did you work under at Aberdare Collieries.?

Mr. Roy McKelvie was Secretary. Jack Cummings was Chief Clerk and then there were the managers of the various pits. I had wonderful experience out there. Mind you, I still had to ride my bike.

Next move was to Aberdare No. 8 office in Elm Street, Bundamba, which was an old home, the former Price residence. There was quite a lot of room there - a strong room, boardroom etc. There were about 5 of us in the office and we all had different skills. The haulages were just outside and the noise! You could hear the wagons go down the tunnel and again when they were hauling the filled wagons up and the coal trucks driving around the site. More noise and dust! Aberdare No. 6 was on the other side of the road but was no longer functioning. Some of the men from No. 8 knew that they could get out of the mine before knock-off by coming through No. 6. Manager Bill Walker caught them one day and one miner was at No. 6 tunnel mouth calling out not to come up or they'd have their pay docked. Unfortunately he called them all by name! Education is wonderful!

There was a big bathroom down by No. 6 which all the men used. By chance, someone was shooting cats and had a spot to get rid of them which was over by the coalstone heap near the bathroom expecting them to be covered by dumped stone. The dumping of stone was discontinued for a time and the miners were complaining of a smell which they attributed to the water and threatened a strike. Fortunately the source of the smell was discovered and a load of stone covered the cats and averted the strike.

There was a cash-in-transit policy for the payroll which involved a police escort from Ipswich. The escort would stand outside the National Bank while the pay was collected so if anyone was interested in snatching the money, all they had to do was stand over the road and think "payroll". To counteract this, times and routes were varied. Security for the pays meant that we had to have the revolver out on the table, staff inside and all the doors locked. It used to get very warm in there as there were no fans. One of the police escorts, Bob Titcomb, was terrific on security and one day he picked up the gun to test it and a bullet came out of the chamber. Whoever loaded the gun didn't know how to put the safety-catch on so staff were given lessons.

A couple of sidelights on the pays: one miner told the manager that his wife said he could keep any coin in his envelope and I was instructed to put in as much coin as I could. What an experience! He had to go to the pub and exchange the coin to notes to take home. Another miner had passed away, wages owing were made up and I had to deliver it to his wife. What a commotion! And his wife was very upset as she had never received a pay envelope like this nor the amount of money. I found out that the miner had his own pay envelopes and would make his own pay out before going home.

In the big workshop at No. 8 there were surveyors, electricians, engineers, mechanics and blacksmiths and I often tried to get them to do "foreigners" for me but they were a bit reluctant. It was great to see these skilled tradesmen at work but not for long as it was back to the office and pay sheets and typing and filing in the strongroom. Next move was back to the New Whitwood site at New Chum where Aberdare had set up a coal treatment plant (1961). The old office from Aberdare Extended was rebuilt there and with the addition of two army huts was refurbished and painted. It was

a relief to go into that beautiful office. Typing the reports for the monthly Board meetings was a marathon task taking nearly all day. All those figures! Mr. McKelvie would come out of his office "How are you going Dave?" "All right Mr. McKelvie." And I'd plod on.

The late 60s saw the first employment of a female in the office. Prior to this, women were not employed on mine sites and there were quite a few adjustments to be made. I was the "lucky" one to show where the kitchen was and explain things like septic toilets. It was a man's world and some did not settle though others quickly fitted in and were very efficient. I recall one, who though a little slower than some others, was almost 100% and you knew her work would be spot on. Alterations to the awards meant changes which entailed more records. Long Service Leave came into being, then there was Sick Pay. Bonus schemes came in but not for the office staff at first and we had to state our case. The miners said we did not produce the coal but we maintained that we sold the coal so we were part of it also. There was friendly rivalry between miners and office staff. The office was a busy place with phone calls, selling coal, checking weights of trucks and making contact with other firms.

Interviewer: How did you report to the mine owners or the board?

Being in charge of pay rolls, I put a system in place. We had up to 190 men so we had to streamline our system instead of having a paysheet that long with 24 men and all the deductions. We used the Kalamazoo system and we did blocks of ten and used carbon. You could hand out 5 sheets, 5 timesheets.

Interviewer: Did you invent the system?

I did it with Kalamazoo. Wally Walker was the Manager and one Monday he came out to the main office and said "I

want to look at the pay sheets". He looked and said "That is not how you pay them." Yes Wal" was my comment. "Don't yes Wal me". So I didn't say anything. Away he went and stopped the pay sheets. We altered the pay sheets five times and it came back to the original system. Dear Wally said "You know everything don't you?" "Yes Wal". "There you go again!" But he was a good manager to the staff in the office.

Interviewer: The pay structure must have been quite complex with leave, sick pay and different rates.

It was all under different columns – names, hours worked and then you'd come into extras. Years back when miners worked under contracts there was income tax, explosives, union fees, miners' pension and all the little extras. You had your gross pay, deductions, net and balance. You had to write it all on the pay envelope With the Kalamazoo system of blocks of ten it was carbon and ever thing was done with the stroke of a pen and it was efficient.

Interviewer: Was it fortnightly pay?

Initially it was fortnightly and then later it became weekly.

Interviewer: Why did it change?

The men paid bills on Friday. Occasionally the Coal Owners Association would ring and ask my interpretation of some issue in the Award and even went as far as calling me "Mr West Moreton" – I was quite proud of that.

Another move for the office took it south near the open cuts where raw coal was stock-piled to go to the wash plant. In order to gain coal, the office was shifted once more to the bottom of New Chum Hill opposite Clay-Pave. Later it was sold and moved to Newhill Colliery.

The men were excellent. Terrific fellows, even though sometimes it seemed that they did not know my name. It was payday and you would hear them coming up the office steps and they were going to see that b in the office about their pay. That b..... was Dave!

Yes, we had a few horses involved in the different mines. Wonderful animals; they would smell their way between the iron rails in the dark and they knew how many wagons they could pull. If the miners put an extra one on, they would jib. There was one horse named Creamy and the miner who looked after him was Joe Mills and he loved and trained his horse. Sometimes another miner was put on to drive him but despite pushing, nudging and getting up on his back, the horse refused to move. Then Joe would get up on him and say "alright Creamy, when you're ready" and off he would go. The horses seemed to have an idea when it was time to knock off and they'd work a bit harder to get the wagons up and out they would come. In the pits with tunnel access the horses simply walked in and out. They knew the men who led them round the mine.

Interviewer: How did you get the horses down the shaft?

This was quite a few years ago. They had a leather arrangement that was attached under the cage and this would fit around the horse to lower and lift him up. Sometimes a horse would kick and throw himself around so he would stay underground and was fed and groomed down there. When it was time to bring him out, they encouraged him to come out through what was known as the foxes tunnel.

(This is no longer there as area has been open cut). The horse still jibbed and only went half-way so they waited and hoped hunger would bring him out but they found that the Deputy was looking after his horse and feeding him and watering

him in the tunnel. He was eventually coaxed out by another horse. Digger Meehan was the horse attendant and looked after all the horses and any ailments they had. When it was necessary for a horse to be destroyed, Digger would call on me to bring my rifle down to the back paddock. He would take a piece of chalk and make a mark on his forehead and say "Don't miss". Digger would check the pulses and make sure that the horse was dead and then he was put down an old disused mine shaft.

One end of year, the pit worked a double shift on the Thursday because the pit did not produce coal on the Friday. Digger had been treating one horse which had multiple cancers with no success. He asked me to go down on the Thursday and pass the horse on. When the men found out on the Friday, they weren't very happy with me. "He had worked two shifts and all he got was a bullet". Digger was well-respected by the men and was able to make them understand the position.

The men did not work on the last day but had a breakup function when we would often have visitors such as Union officials and even Members of Parliament. Of course, office staff worked - we had to do the pays and pay the men before the Christmas break.

One person was rostered on to work in the office over the Christmas break, with a couple of men doing maintenance around the pit. I had one interesting Christmas. Management had all gone on holidays and there was a fire in one of the old tunnels exposed in the open cut. No manager available so David Donald was appointed Manager. I had no real responsibility but I had to be able to sign as manager if required. The open cut operator (a private contractor) was working on the bulldozer bare-footed but said he was okay. "I drive in and drop the blade and I have it in reverse". I had

to monitor how the fire was going and eventually we got it out. It was an experience but no thanks or bonus; should have kept a copy of that appointment.

Interviewer: Which mine was that?

New Whitwood shaft area, New Chum Hill.

Upgrading of office procedures were being planned. Mistakes were made with the computerisation of the weighbridge and it wasn't really good, not fast working.

Then there were financial problems and we went into receivership. It was a very worrying time.

Interviewer: When was this?

In the late 1970s Hungerfords were the appointed receivers and seemed to think they knew everything but found they had to refer to me about all the different systems. I gave them all the honest stuff but it was not well accepted. One gentleman, Dudley Painter, came on behalf of the receivers and was a wonderful big man. He was great to deal with and gave good guidance. "It's not what you know, it is who you know". Sadly, Dudley died and we had another rep come up from Brisbane who was very difficult and arrogant. Then we would have the chief, Mr Graham Tucker, make visits from Brisbane. Just walked in and acknowledged no-one and meandered through the rooms, didn't seem to know how to say hello.

Cheques were not signed in the office at Ipswich. We filled the cheques out for the wages and, on occasions, I had to go to Brisbane to get the cheque signed so that the men could be paid next day. At the Brisbane office, you explained who you were and who you wanted to see. You were told to sit over there and you'd be called. Very different from our office,

people were attended to. On one visit, the lift opened and Mr. Tucker appeared. I presented my cheque book and said "David Donald from Aberdare" and asked him to sign it. "Thank you very much." How that worked out I'll never know and the receptionist was horrified. I called on two other men at the receiver's office and told them what I had done and they were amazed. "We don't do things that way" but it was done. The receiver's Secretary, Mr Allan Davis, recognised me as Office Administrator.

Other problems arose under receivership. We'd sell coal to Japan and we'd get paid through a bank in Hong Kong and when the cheque came through it would go to Brisbane and be put into interest-bearing term deposits. We couldn't pay our accounts until the time the receivers had invested it for had lapsed.

There were contractors onsite with the open cuts and the earth moving contractor was a wonderful fellow; all his men respected him and I did too. He'd bring his account to the office and we'd check it. He would expect payment on the 27th of the month and sometimes the money was not available. I was terribly embarrassed because it had been our system that everything was attended to on time but not under the receivers.

I had total knee replacements on both legs in 1985. I had surgery in Wesley Hospital on Melbourne Cup Day and after having pre-op medication I told the wardsmen that horse 13 would win the Cup and it did. Some days later they asked what horse connections I had and I had no idea. Then I realised that my bed was number 13 and I had said "What a nuisance" (meaning my leg) and that was the name of the Cup winner. On my return to work I must have slowed up a bit, the receivers were still there and there seemed to be a lot going on behind the scenes and some talk about retirement. I said I will give it a month

and we'll talk about it and then I came to the decision that it was time for me to go.

The miners were ready to go out on strike as they thought I was being pushed out and I had to convince them that it was my decision and was on my terms.

Interviewer: So you were there 42 years and one day? What was the one day?

I went back that one day to work out all my entitlements as there was no-one with the knowledge to work it out because of my length of service.

Management wanted to give me a gift when I finished but all I wanted was a farewell function with men. They gave me a reclining chair and a painting by Alan Purnell. The men also gave me a wonderful gift which was totally unexpected.

Interviewer: Did you get the function with the men that you wanted?

It went all day; they lost production. Management had decided to have time off between shifts so the men could come and talk to me on my last day. One hour they thought; it was quite interesting. The men came up to the office and the contractors came in. At some men's functions they had strippers and there was a phone call to say that some ladies were coming. I was prepared to call it quits when this car came in and the men told me they had arrived. What a relief! It was the ladies from the Brisbane office.

Interviewer: You were involved in the social club at Aberdare No. 8?

Yes I was a member and I went to the functions. We took two shillings per pay and the money was handed to the Secretary of the Social Club. They organised dances and bus trips to the coast. We had picnics to places like Sandgate and Redcliffe – wonderful

family days out. There was one chap who went on the trips and was asked not to swear. He used to split a word like “kanga-bloody-roo” and really didn’t know he was swearing. He was a wonderful fellow – Dave Brown. I often see some of the men and we always talk.

Interviewer: Did you have Christmas parties?

We had them at the hall in Bundamba and at the National Hall in Booval. There was always a Father Christmas (Dad Woolley) and all the children were given gifts. You’d get an inkling that something was going on and Father Christmas would have some trinkets or special gifts to give out. “Maxie, are you here?” Maxie had to come out and get his gift – a little bag of river gravel. His wife asked “What is that for?” Unfortunately a week or so before the Christmas party, he’d been out at College’s Crossing where he should not have been and his car got bogged in the gravel. He was in real trouble as his wife wanted to know just what he was doing out there.

There were a lot of humorous men underground and any bits of gossip would often be chalked on the side of the coal-wagons and spread around the pit e.g. the time the men were caught sneaking out of No. 6 tunnel to knock off early.

A lot of conversation went on at the Racehorse Hotel. Aberdare and Rylance shared a boundary and at times their workings overlapped and boy was that seam hit with explosives with each set of miners able to hear the others either above or below.

The Deputy took me down one Thursday on the back shift. The shot firer had drilled the holes and was putting in the plugs. They had a stemmer rod to push it in and then it was tamped tight. In the early days they used a blue fuse and cap

which they would crunch with their teeth and they knew how much time they had to get out. When it got to the stage we had all the holes charged and I counted the plugs - 4 ½. Billy Moses, the Deputy, took me out of the section and the men came out to fire it. Bill said “You’ve unsettled Ken (the shot-firer).” In the office, we had to balance all the explosives and detonators used and there was a limit of about 28 ounces in the shot. This was overloaded. Later I got a card from Ken and he signed it “Boom Boom”.

I would just like to acknowledge all those with whom I worked at Aberdare Collieries: -

Secretaries	2
Superintendent	3
General Managers and Managers	26
Office Staff	Male 9 Female 8
Engineers	3
Electricians	3
Fitters	6
Surveyors	6

Men from Aberdare still meet up and, with their wives, have an evening out. Lots of talk and laughter and memories.