

George Pringle

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Interviewer: Margaret
Cook

His daughter, Joanne
Miller, also participated

I joined the industry in 1941. I worked up at Rosewood at Westfalen No 1 Colliery. Before that I worked at Krugers sawmill. I was 14. I wasn't there too long.

At that particular time there (WWII) man power was operating in Ipswich. Krugers sawmill was part of the war effort and you had to get permission to leave there to go to another job. So I asked man power to release me to go into the mines at Rosewood.

Interviewer: Why did you want to go to Rosewood and join the mining industry?

It was the only way to get into the industry. You couldn't get a job in the other pits at West Moreton. Up at Rosewood you could.

I got a job there as a wheeler – a horse wheeler. I used to drive the pit ponies to the pit.

I wanted to get into mining. I got in there and did alright. I was there about 12 or 18 months. I used to travel each day. I had to get up early each morning to catch the truck up to Rosewood. – McCaffertys truck. I used to catch it at Booval and get a ride up to the mine.

Interviewer: A few of you would go up each day?

Yes and come back. It was getting too much. We started at 7am and finished at 3pm. We caught the truck a little after 3.

They had no bathrooms or anything up there at that particular time. You came out of the mine, got your clothes and went home dirty.

Interviewer: What time did you catch the bus in the morning?

5 o'clock. It was a long day.

Interviewer: What is the job of a wheeler?

You pull the wagons out with the horse to the men's workplace. You went underground with them?

Interviewer: What was it like underground in those days?

They had low seams up at Rosewood. It was cleaner coal up there than they had at West Moreton. They had a big band of stone about that thick. They used to hole in underneath.

They'd go about a foot down. They would hook it out. They would go right across the board, doing that, laying on their belly. Using a pick.

When they did that they used to bore into the stone with a hand borer. They made a nick in the roof for the spike to go through and then wind it all up and tighten it all up. Then the borer machine would go in the frame and you bored your hole. You fired all the stone and all that was left was the tops, the clean coal.

The bottoms were cleaned too but the stone was dirty. When they got all the stone down across the board they would put that on either side of the rails. They used wooden rails at that time – 2 by 2s. They would stack all the stone up to the roof and then they would chock it with wedges. They used to bring the rails

forward and also the timber. So all the area was packed up with stone and chocked. They had the props at the back of the rails and they used to bring them forward after they had fired all the tops out.

They would bring the wagons forward and the rails would come forward so they could be near the coal to fill. That is what they did up there. When they finished their wagons they would wheel them onto tables – flat tables. They would skid them around.

Sometimes the rails would get chewed away and you would have to put new ones in each day. They weren't very big wagons – about as big as this table. (1 metre). They would only be about 800 weight.

Interviewer: So they would have a few of them at a time?

They would have at least two. They would have about two lots of rails on either side of the board. So the empties came in on one road. Across the board was another set of rails and a table and then on the other rails were the full ones and they would pull them along to the main road. I used to be out there with the horse to pull them out.

Interviewer: Can you explain the table process to me?

The tables were slabs – 6 by 2 boards. We called them slabs. They used to fit in between the rails. So you put your wagon onto the table and slue it around. It had so many wagons over it each day it just about wore away.

Interviewer: Back then how many miners were underground?

GP: At least one. One miner to a board. With 4 or 5 set of miners with one miner on a board.

Interviewer: So they worked on their own? Later on that wasn't safe.

That is right. It was contract work. 5 shillings a ton.

So we'd haul the coal out and go to the next place and so forth. You'd pull the wagons out for the men and drop off the empties.

I was a day man. Wheelers worked for the company. I was a company wheeler.

Interviewer: Was it your job to look after the ponies, feed and shoe them?

A lot of other jokers used to mess about with the ponies. Feed them, shoe them and everything. I would just take them down and bring them back up and put them in the stables. Another bloke, he used to come and take the harness off them. Then he'd come along and do the same

thing and harness them up. I used to take them down.

Interviewer: Did you wear the safety helmet, light and safety gear underground?

No safety helmet. I wore a rag hat. We had a carbine lamp.

Interviewer: Decent boots?

You bought your own boots. I wore sandshoes. The old type of sandshoes.

Interviewer: Safety was not a big issue then?

It wasn't at that particular time. You had to be careful what you were doing.

Interviewer: So you were working on your own with not a lot of safety gear. It is certainly a changed time isn't it?

Yes.

Interviewer: After 18 months you left and went to West Moreton?

To Rhondda Collieries. Big Rhondda. The shaft workings. They had started to operate in the First World War. I went there in 1943.

Interviewer: Did you have to get permission again?

I was alright then. Bob Scott was the Manager at Rhondda Colliery.

Vince Smith was the Under Manager. You had to be 18 years old before you could go to the workings down below.

I was 16 when I started at Rhondda Collieries?

I was on top. I took the stone wagons to the washing plant. Rhondda was the only mine with a washing plant. You could wash the coal and separate the stone and the rest. It was way out in the paddock. You would fill the wagons up. Then I got a job down below as a horse wheeler.

Interviewer: Is that what you really wanted to do?

Yes. There were about 24 or 25 horses that went underground everyday. It was a big mine. They used to have limbers, shalves (round limbers) and a groove cut out with a gun fitted up in there with a steel peg in it. At Rosewood it had a swingle bar and tail chain. That is what I had up there.

Interviewer: If there are 25 horses how many wheelers are there?

25. There were 33 sets of coal miners on the coal (two miners in a set)

It was machine cut coal. We used Sullivan machines –coal cutters. They used to run along the rails.

The outlay of the mine down below was headings and levels. The levels as they are driven in, (as they put a cut through in) they were steep.

Interviewer: How much clearance did you have in that mine?

Plenty. It was high. As they were going the steep places got steeper and steeper.

Interviewer: Was this machinery steam driven?

Electrical. They made their own electricity from DC coal for the coal cutters and the borers.

We used to get 3 and a halfpenny per ton for hewing their coal. It was a big difference from Rosewood to Rhondda.

They would bore all the holes for you and all you had to do was get the coal out. There were people working underneath a long way.

Interviewer: Was it a good company to work for?

As bad as the others.

Interviewer: How long did you work at Rhondda?

About 8 years. I went from Rhondda to Southern Cross and I was there 33 years.

Interviewer: What other jobs did you do at Rhondda?

I started on the coal with my cousin, Jim Clarkson. He broke me into the two years I had to have. My two year apprenticeship.

Interviewer Were you assigned to someone?

Yes the faceman. He looked after you. The faceman was the head man on the coal.

Interviewer: What did you have to do in that time?

He tutored you about certain things from time to time. How to set a crown. You didn't have to lay rails as they were laid for you. You rolled the wagons up and spragged the wheels – with wooden sprags.

Interviewer: Did you have other family members in the mines?

My father and his father. My father worked at Binnie near the fertiliser place at Blackstone. Binnies had a tunnel going down there. He worked at McQuinns. My uncle George was in the mines too but he got killed at Quinn's. My son didn't go into the mines. My Great-grandfather was a miner in Scotland.

Joanne Miller: My older brother David wasn't allowed to go into the mines.

Interviewer: So you were with Southern Cross for 33 years. What mines did they have?

Southern Cross No 6; Southern Cross 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 ,12, 14 and 15. They were out at Bonnie Dundee - way out. They fed Swanbank Power Station.

I worked in number 6, 7, 10, 12 and 15.

Mechanisation came into play in the mid 1950s. Quinns mechanised first in and around that area. Southern Cross got things as they could afford it. They had scrapers, scraper loaders.

The scraper loader was a double drum. The ropes used to stay at the face. The loader is tied down. You would sit on the loader and pull levers. One scraper would go in and fill up and then you would pull it back and tip the coal out. Pull a lever and the other scraper would go. That is all you would do until it was finished.

Interviewer: Was it easier work?

A lot easier yes. The other mines were hand mining.

Interviewer: Was hand mining still going on in other places with the machines coming in?

Yes. The only thing was they had electric borers instead of hand borers.

Interviewer. What was the last mine to change to machines? By the 1960s was everyone mechanised?

Every mine would be mechanised with shuttle cars, loaders. The continuous miner came into play. That was a big huge thing as long as this room.

Interviewer: That needed a conveyor belt?

Yes it had a conveyor belt up the centre of it. It had big arms. It used to push the coal into a heap.

It would scrape out over the top and into the shuttle car. The shuttle car weighed ten ton empty and over 20 ton full. It carried some coal.

Interviewer: In a day how many shuttle cars would they fill?

In about 10 minutes it would fill a shuttle car. The miner would prepare the coal while the car was away.

Interviewer What do you mean by prepare the coal?

We had rippers which would revolve with picks on them. It would pick the coal. It would strip it out.

Interviewer: Was it unbelievably noisy?

Oh noisy. The noise was horrific. You couldn't hear yourself talk. You'd go up to your mate and shout at your mate. "Let's put a prop up here". "What did you say?"

Interviewer: Did your ears ring when you got home?

Did they what! There were no earmuffs to take the noise out. When the shuttle car came in it had two 50 horse power motors and a 50 horse power motor driving the diesel driving the system and two 10 horse power motors driving the conveyor belts.

Interviewer: So you had the engines humming all the time?

All the time. When the cars were a little bit late you had silence. You had coal ready for when they came back.

Interviewer: What safety gear did you have then?

We had the safety helmet and a battery light on the waist band.

Interviewer: Did the company provide the gear?

Yes the company did, but not the safety helmet. You had to buy your own helmet. They provided the

clothes. Long pants for winter and shorts for summer.

Interviewer: What hours did you work at Southern Cross?

About 7 until 4pm. At Rhondda we worked from 8am to 4pm. This was 7 to 4 with an hour's overtime.

The next shift was from 3pm until 11. They could have an hours overtime till midnight if they wanted to. There was a dog watch until 7am when the day shift started.

Interviewer: How many men would be on the day shift?

About 8 – the miner, car driver, other men on the belts. There were about 6 men on the dog watch.

They would get the materials ready for the day shift to come in again. In the day shift they would have a couple of men on the surface getting ready for the night shift to come in.

I was on alternate shifts. Later on I went on the dogwatch shift. I had a Deputy's certificate so I had to replace the Deputy on the dogwatch if he got hurt or something.

We went to the mines rescue station at Booval to get our Deputy's ticket. The man in charge at the mines rescue was Max Frazier. We used to go there on a Monday night for a couple of hours. He was a lovely

chap and he used to get us altogether there and tutor us. He taught us about safety lights. He would light 2 or 3 up and get us to read the gas. It wasn't the same as in town where it was silent gas – the ordinary gas into people's homes. He had to use carbine gas.

That is what we called town gas. It was different altogether. He told us about that. When you go for your test you will find it a lot different in town. He'd get us to put a lamp up a hole and ask how much gas you had there. "about 2 percent" "You've got a little bit more than that" "That's about right. It won't be the same in town.

Interviewer: Does it change colour and size?

Yes you pull the wick down enough that there is a blue flame on it. The flame rises.

The higher the flame the more gas. If you put your lamp up too hard you put it out.

Interviewer: It's a real skill.

Yes it is a skilled job.

We studied on Monday nights for about 3 months. There were about 8 of us. He made arrangements with the Mines Inspector and we would have to go into town and be tested. Answer a few questions and so

forth. He would tell us if we got through.

Interviewer: Did he tell you straight away?

We got our certificate posted to us. I got my certificate in about 1947.

You never got a job straight away because you had the certificate. But if you were working in a mine with a full time Deputy and he was away you might get a few days experience.

I became a full time Deputy in the 1960s.

I never got that job at Rhondda as they had so many of them. It was a waste of time staying there if you wanted to further your career.

Interviewer: What did you do as the Deputy?

You went out early in the morning, two hours before the men started. About 5 o'clock. You would go down the mine and inspect it and check the gas. Check the breeze or wind, see if it was going in the right direction. You would check the air ways. Some of the places were full of water and you would pump it up to the surface to get it ready for the men.

Interviewer: And if the wind wasn't going the right way or conditions were poor what did you do?

You had to go around and see why. There might be a bag down in the way. You would put it back up to get the air flowing through.

You had to watch that all through the day. You had to watch the younger men down the mines.

Interviewer So you were a supervisor?

Call me a supervisor if you like. I became the senior deputy after a few years.

Interviewer: Tell me about the unions.

Yes the Miners Union was very active. They used to come out if there was a dispute happening and meet with the management and see what could be done. Other times there would be no agreement so we would have time off. We would have a meeting and they'd say give them a week off.

Interviewer: Everyone was in the union?

Not management. We used to go to the Miners Hall for meetings. About 1000 could fit in.

Joanne Miller: Sometime you used to have to call the check inspectors in.

Sometimes I couldn't get the company to do something so I would call the check inspectors in. These were Union men. If that

didn't come to anything we used to walk out.

Joanne Miller: What about strikes?

We had a 9 week strike once in 1949.

Interviewer: That must have been hard on your family? That is no pay for 9 weeks.

There other workers on the wharves would break the boxes and deliberately break bags of cabbages or whatever and would send them to the union who would take them to the hall at Booval.

Joanne Miller: To this day the MUA and the miners union are extremely close. What effect did this have on the women?

Some of the women came to the meetings. Some were working.

Idress Williams was the miners president in NSW. It was a national coal strike.

When we went to the national hall we would have a feed, coffee etc. - that sort of business.

Joanne Miller: When Dad was on strike everyone went out. The women went out, the families went out.

Joanne Miller. What about shooting rabbits for meat?

Some of the young fellows would shoot rabbits for the families to eat.

Joanne Miller: What about the strikes you had at Southern Cross?

GP: Most of them were a week off or 24 hours or 48 hours. They would get fixed up.

The mining proprietors were terribly hard fellows. You couldn't get a penny out of them.

Interviewer: Did the strike help?

Yes. They were losing money.

Joanne Miller: What about union officials. Who do you remember?

Idress Williams in 1949. Tommy Miller, the Queensland President. Cyril Vickers was President of a branch of the miners union.

Joanne Miller: What about sit ins? They aren't strikes. They used to sit in the mine.

We had one at Southern Cross for about a week. We stayed in the mine each night. The ladies auxiliary brought food and we slept in the mine. Thirty or so men.

One time when Southern Cross had its sit-in Lady Flo Bjelke Petersen brought her pumpkin scones. This was in the early 80s. "You can keep your jobs boys" she said. Joh wanted to close the whole of

Southern Cross. He wanted to get rid of as many miners as he could old Joh. We were the first ones he picked on. He wanted to shut us down and Swanbank Station as he had a station in north Queensland in his territory. He wanted to shut us down straight away. If that happened then we got put out of a job – a certain few each year.

Interviewer: So they did wind it down?

Yes there was Southern Cross no 9, 10, 11, 12 and 15 going. So discontinued in one mine and moved the men to another mine in the district. Then he cut the coal usage down at Swanbank and those men had to go up to north Queensland to get work.

Interviewer: Was Southern Cross still operating when you retired?

No it finished on 14 December 1984. We knew we didn't have a job on the Monday.

We had seen it coming for a while and were finally told on the Friday that that was it. We were prepared for the inevitable – as much as you can be.

We knew it was coming but it doesn't make it any easier really. It is still a big shock when it finally happens. This had been mine and other men's lives – it was very hard.

Some got jobs up in central Queensland.

Interviewer: What did you do?

I was old enough to get my super. I was 57. There was a sense of relief by myself and my family that I was getting out still alive as we had seen so much tragedy over the years with Box Flat and the like.

I retired. My brother worked at a Haenke Mine and he got me a job there but I wouldn't take it as there were other men who needed it. I had 200 odd sick days and other things. So I never went back underground. I have been off 23 years this Christmas. I will be 81 next January.

Interviewer: Do you miss it?

Not now but I did. It was very hard at the time. You miss the men and the industry – it has been your life. I particularly missed the company of the other men – mining is so special this way. You have to put your life in other men's hands for years and this develops a special bond. I could have done another 3 years had everything been alright. Other married fellows needed the work.

Interviewer: So you were still in the industry during the Box Flat disaster?

Yes we lost a couple of days over that as we were so close.

Interviewer: Did it have a big impact on you all?

Yes it had a terrible impact across the community. Operationally – no. They shut the mine down for safety reasons. The mining inspectors went down and checked it all. They said everything was ok and we went back.

Interviewer: What happened at Box Flat?

They had a shut down. Most of their men found work at other mines. The union helped them get jobs.

Interviewer: Did it ever open again?

No. It was a terrible situation – so many men killed. That was the worst in the West Moreton field.

Interviewer: There were others?

There were 4 men killed at North Ipswich in the 1940s. There were another 2 men killed at Extended Colliery at Raceview in the 1940s. Other lives were also lost during my time.

We used to use the carbine light but the safety light came into vogue. They had to do something as things started to get crook.

Interviewer: Did wages improve?

Yes over the years as things went up.

Interviewer: Was it a good job?

It was depending on what you were charged to do. I didn't mind it. It was a job you could do for 5 minutes and have a bit of a spell. However, there was a lot of responsibility. As a Deputy you had men's lives in your hands. There could be a lot of stressful and tense times with safety issues. I enjoyed the times with the men – good mateship.

Interviewer: How did it compare with others like railways?

As it was the miners were better paid. About £1. It mightn't be as much as that but we always got a bit more than anyone else.

Interviewer: This was through the unions?

Through the unions.

Interviewer: What is it like underground?

In summer it is hot but not like on the surface. A different heat. It is dry but mixed with dampness. You sweat a bit but different from the surface. In winter time it was cool.

Interviewer: Did you have a coat?

Yes a coat and long pants.

Joanne Miller: You might want to talk about the mining families that have inter-married? You married Mum and she was a miners' daughter.

A lot of men married other miners daughters.

There were miners' picnics in the 1930s. There would be 5 trains as far as Rosewood. The miners train would go to the loop line at Bundamba. The place was littered with people going to the miners' annual picnic at Sandgate.

We had dances at the National Hall at Booval about once a month. The branches used to have kids Christmas parties.

We had the pit Christmas tree and each family bought a gift for under the tree or the ladies auxiliary.

I used to get a tree out of the bush in the Swanbank area – a proper Christmas tree - and bring it to the hall and set it up. Put toys under the tree. Oh we had enjoyable days, not like today.

Joanne Miller: I still remember the pit Christmas tree. It was the highlight of the year. We used to get new clothes. It was incredible.

Interviewer Did all the wives cook and bring a plate?

They could if they wanted to. I think the company put in a contribution but it was a union thing.

The mine used to shut down on a Friday – half a day. We would go and have a few jugs. I didn't touch it. The others did. We would have 2 or 3 hours together. We had real good times.

MC: So the families did get to know each other?

Joanne Miller: My generation is the last generation of the mining families intermarrying. I married a miner's son and grandson. We are the last of the line.

Joanne Miller: The miners union was the leading union with the wharfies. They fought to get holiday loading at Christmas. The miners led the way on all the conditions issues. They went out on strike for that.

You won the long service leave, extra pay for Christmas (17%), lower working hours. You went out for 35 hours. One of the first unions to do that. The other unions always followed.

You can't work when you are tired.

The miners union had a tribunal of their own. They never went to

courts or anything. The tribunal was set up for miners for themselves. Most issues went through the tribunal.

Joanne Miller: As families we hated it when he was on the dogwatch. If something was going to happen it would happen on that shift.

It was at night. Seemed to be that there was a lot of movement through that shift. If anything happened it tended to happen on the dogwatch. Falls or situations different from the day or afternoon shift.

Joanne Miller: We grew up all of our lives never knowing if he would come home from work. Since the day I was born. Some of our friends didn't come home.

Joanne Miller: The union was always there so the boys could get together and talk.

Joanne Miller: Do you want to talk about the TB x-rays.

That was another thing we won. The miners from West Moreton could go to Brisbane and get chest x-rays. We got a paid day off for chest x-rays.

The stone dust that they used for the roof and sides and floor, if you got that in your lungs it set like cement and you couldn't get it out. I

was in the thick of that. I am always glad I haven't got something.

Once I was called back. I had pneumonia and pleurisy in 1947 and I was in hospital for about a month.. I got called back in 1949 to be re-tested. They put a rubber cloak over me and x-rayed me. I have a pleurisy scar across my ribs. The only thing that was showing was two ribs at the top and two at the bottom, but it has never gone against me so far.

Joanne Miller: Did you talk about your injuries down the mine. Remember the cave in and your leg.

I was at Southern Cross 6 in the old workings and the roof came in and nearly cut my leg off.

It had a sharp edge and nearly took off my leg. I couldn't work for about 6 weeks. I got workers compensation.

Another time I was picking coal and a big piece came out side on and cut my back.

Joanne Miller: You were off for a long time with that one. Workers comp never made up the wages they were on. It went down to the basic wage – no overtime. The union always helped. If you were off work before the kids went back to school they helped out with books. You never really did without.