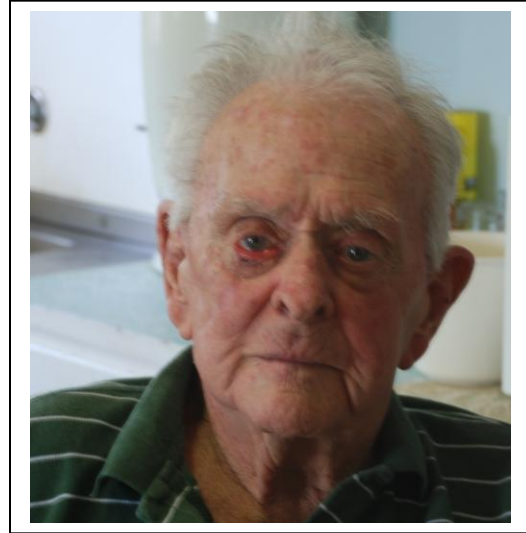


Ian Bryce

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook



I started working on Klondyke Colliery in 1931. It is in Raymond's Hill. As you come up the road, you could go straight ahead in those days, round Power Street and down. It's about a quarter of a mile round there. I lived in Musgrave Street, only a couple of hundred yards to walk to work.

I was fourteen when I started out at the mine. I started work carrying mine timber for a year or two, and then I started working at the mine top. Then I worked underground for four or five years and 18 months on the coke ovens. Then I joined the railways for 14 years.

Was your father a miner before you?

No. He was a moulder – and his brother, and my grandfather, and my mother's father. He learnt his trade in Glasgow. I'm full Scottish descent. Dad's side came from Edinburgh.

I started in the first Depression. I was lucky to get a job. Well, he was laid off for six years. They weren't sacked, but they laid them off.

Interviewer: So you had to get some work?

Yes, get the bit you could. As I say, they were lucky I was working.

Interviewer: Can you describe Klondyke Mine?

We had a shaft for air and tunnels for mining. About three, I think we had altogether. They were fairly steep, and the last one was down from the church. After I left (it got too far for haulage) and they put a bore down, up where Radio 94.9 FM is up here, on the other side of it. You can still see the bore.

They put another haulage underground, and they could pull the skips up to there, and then hook onto the other one and pull it to the surface. I know, because we were about 700 yards in the

old main tunnel. It used to run straight down there.

They had haulage machines powered by an electric motor. They had about a 90hp motor driving it, and the rope was about 1 inch thick.

Interviewer: How many men would have worked there?

Altogether no more than about 48 altogether in my day. There was a lot of Scots. See, the boss himself, Bob Lawrie, was born in Fyfe and quite a few were returned men, when I started, from the First World War – and they were all Scots. I think in 1948 there were about 23 or 24 Scots.

Interviewer: Did you work a morning and an afternoon shift?

Sometimes. It all depended on what coal was brought up. I did work 3.00 to 11.00 once, for a period. That's when we opened up another tunnel and we were getting it ready for men to change in to work in.

Interviewer: And what were wages like?

Six and a penny a ton. We worked very hard. We filled 26 ton 8 cwt per shift. I was good on the shovel. I admit that.

Interviewer: I'd like to talk about the coke ovens. When did you work there?

It would have been in 1938 or 1939. I got that way in the end I was glad to leave, because when anybody left, I got

hooked to do his job because I'd got experience in certain things. I could drive the haulage and one thing and another.

I think they got me back when I joined up. I didn't go to war– it might have been to my good - but I don't know.

I had to go to Creek Street in Brisbane to join the Air Force, which I did, got notice. I was working over in the other street at the time. They picked me up in a fortnight's time, on the Saturday. They called all right, handed me a letter: "Return to the mine on Monday." We were an essential service. Then I don't think the boss wanted me to go, because he called on me.

Interviewer: So did many join up from the ovens, or did everyone stay?

Only two, I think.

At the ovens, at that time of the year, instead of starting work about half past 6.00 to 7.00, we started at 2.00 o'clock am.

You imagine what it would be like. They were loaded. The ovens were round, and the door, and they held 5 ton of slack coal. It was level. Then when the readings of the coke were taken out, you had to pull that out with long steel rakes, and you had to knock the door down. It was only bricked up and slurried over and set hard. When you knocked it down, you had to put in a 2 inch pipe with a hose, had to join it

up above your, and water it down so it was cool enough to pull out.

Then you had to clean the ashes out, and then reload it again. So 5 ton of coal in 45 minutes.

Interviewer: You were good with a shovel!

I had a talk to the old fellow who was born in Wales, Ben Morgan. He was the main coke worker. He said, "I could do it easy enough, but," he said, "I can't beat him."

Interviewer: So where were the coke ovens?

Down the back there, but you can't get in now. It's fenced. You've got to go round behind the church and down Harrison Street, but I think it would be hard to see because I know they've fenced it now. There's a walk that they've put in, runs from the railway fence through to Brassell, and when you get down one, you can just see a gap up through the trees. It would be from here, halfway up the street here. You can still see the doorway in the coke oven, open.

I think the mine was opened in the late 1800s, and then it was closed down after a few years, and Bob Lawrie re-opened it in 1925. I don't know when he finished up.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how you make coke?

You throw in about 5 ton of sack – as we call it – coal. Level that over and build the door up about eight bricks. You're left with about four holes, and there used to be enough heat to start that going, a whitish smoke. Sometimes you'd just grab a bit of newspaper, light it, and actually you walk on the top and just drop it down and light the gas. It burns for, say, three and a half days, and then you drew it out, and it came out in blocks, in the furnace of melting iron, steel and stuff. It's very hard when it comes out, like, it's pinky.

Interviewer: How many ovens were there?

IB: Twelve, 20, 27. One lot, it went round the run this way. Then it would be that way when you get over there. (*Interviewer: east/west*)

We never ever used them in my time, but then a lot running this way, that was used nearly all the time. Then the pithead, they called it, where you tipped coal, would have a sieve to get that fine coal. Well, outside of that I did a lot of damned work. There were ironstone boulders, to break them, shift them. They were so damned heavy, and you had to try and judge a little bit of a runner in them, and lay gelignite in there and cover it with damp clay, then fire that. It used to crack them. Gelignite has a habit of belting down, and that's what you did. A lot of the explosives would go up. It would crack the damned thing if you put enough into it. Well, I did all that part of it, then shearing up.

Then we built another ten, I think, there.

Interviewer: It's a big operation. So is it a continual process of some heating, some being filled, some being emptied? Is that how it works?

Yes, about four a day, I suppose. A five ton of slack. I think you got about 3 ton 7 or something back in coke, which of course brought more money per ton than coal. The reason for putting these last lot in, was that the pithead was there and you could wheel them. The place was uphill, and you had to drag the rope all the way down, a steel bit of rope, and pull them up there.

Often we'd work Saturdays on them, six days a week.

Interviewer: Was it better paid?

Yes, it was, actually.

Interviewer: And who bought the coke?

The Railways. A lot used to go to Rosewood way. They'd go down and be weighed. All railway wagons have their empty weight on them, you know. They used to run them over the weighbridge and then they'd mark on that how much it is. You used to fill the railway flat wagons, as you called them. When you got so high, you'd start with the bigger end of the coke in like that, and you'd finish up with a load like that.

Interviewer: Did the process of making coke change?

Well, you might as well say we were all hand workers on it. Later on they had big doors and a big ram, and instead of watering down and pulling, the ram pushed it all out. They also had ovens that loaded through the top.

Interviewer: Yours had big front opening doors, and you shovel in?

We had to knock the doors down. They were about that wide, and about three feet high, otherwise you wouldn't be able to shovel them. You put the bricks and you've got a sort of loamy soil, and you had it in a tin and mix it.

MC: A bit like using cement to make concrete?

Yes. Then you plaster it all with that and left a few holes. It might be in two and a half days, you cover them in, just plaster them over, put a bit of brick. Then the next day you probably pull it all out.

Interviewer: And did you get the loamy soil from around here, or did you have to bring that in?

No, we used to get it from Churchill. Old Tom O'Brien reckoned he owned it. I don't know whether he did or not, but we used to send the truck out and get a load of it and just dump it up close to the others.

Interviewer: How many men worked at the ovens?

About five, I think.

Interviewer: So was there a boss and offsidiers, or did you work in teams?

Well, Ben Morgan was actually the boss of the others. He used to say, "I can't beat him shovelling it." Old Ben lived at Tivoli. At Tivoli there are three homes -The Wrights. There's John Wright. Well, Ben owned the middle one, and when old Wright died, Ben managed to buy the old place there. His daughter was living in it, and she was selling it to somebody and they were going to remove it to Brisbane, and they found out it was too bad with white ants. Probably they might have crumbled.

Interviewer: Did Mr Lawrie own the ovens the whole time you were there?

Yes, he owned the mine – well, him and his brother, I think, and somebody else.

Interviewer: And what was Mr Lawrie like?

He was all right but he liked the drink. We had another mine at Marburg – Malabar was the name. You go to Marburg and turn to go to Rosewood, just up about half a mile or so, you turned in to the left and went up through a gully, and we had a mine in there. But it was gas coal; you couldn't

make coke with it. He used to go up there.

One Friday – I don't know what happened – I went up with him, and Mick Tully who was the local Sergeant of Police, taking the pay out. Of course, they get to the hotel on the way there, Haigslea, and of course they've got a thirst. I went in with them, and old Mick said, "Here, hold this. Put it in your shirt." That was his gun. Real Irish he was, red-headed Irishman. He never used to get full, really, but they always used to stop there.

We'd go up there and drop the pay, and then they'd call into the Marburg on the way home and have a couple there.

Interviewer: How long did the ovens continue to be used?

For some time after I went, because Dale Bryce (my son) lived out in Musgrave Street after he was married, and you could always see them. It had to be loaded first, and you'd get a flame about so high that would be coming up out of the top. You had a hole in the top. You could see that. But it was hard work, heavy work.

Interviewer: Do you think they were still going in the 1960s?

Yes, it was about 1960, because it just finished a bit after that.

Interviewer: Did they finish because the people didn't use coke, or another reason?

No, just because I don't think they bothered about using them. Then the mine closed. I think it got too hard to work, see?

This was all, it would have been right from here down – it was all undermined. It's not by machine. You had to need pillars everywhere.

The river got in once in the bottom tunnel. It never came right through, but the bottom one was full of water. It was down, it would be from the main road through, so it will never collapse.

But we struck gas on that side, methane. The Deputy, he had to go down in the morning. It would have been in October 1934, I think, the morning. They used to go halfway down and they had a pulley and the rope used to run round the rollers. He used to go down and grease them all in the mornings, start early. I was down doing it, and he came up and asked me to come down and give him a hand. There'd been a band of roof stone, about so thick, fallen.

He wanted a hand, you know. It would take two of you. You could tip it off to the side, you'd be all right. Anyway, he said, "Will you fix it?" I said yes, and away he went, and I just finished and when it went WHOOSH! He walked into it. He must not have had his light on. It was a big pillar, and they were running a heading, they called it, up

through it to direct the air through. It must have filled with gas, and he walked into it. He lived for the afternoon, but he got badly burnt. He was George Simpson. He was a Sergeant in Black Watch during the First World War.

Interviewer: Did you see other accidents? Were there other accidents in your time?

Yeah. In the other tunnel. I was pit bottom at the time too. I was 17. It was 31 October 1934 at 6.15 am. I was looking after everything that went on, you know. They were driving the tunnel, like, the dip, as we called it, and they used to put a pole, apparently a good, solid one, into a hole in the roof and into the floor, so it would tighten. Anyway, I'd been over and I said to the joker in charge over there, I said, "You want to get that one out and get a decent one in. It's too short. It's standing too straight." About half an hour later, he came racing over. Eddie Jeffrey, I think his name was – and the wagon run through on him. It never killed him, but it busted his hip and that. He never ever worked again. I had the job of seeing how everything came out.

Interviewer: You mentioned the '74 floods and the blow over here?

You could see it from out the front here. You can't now, for the amount of trees, but you'd see all this stuff. You could see the water. You'd see it start, and then all of a sudden – WHOOSH!

Interviewer: And stuff was blown up in the air? Was the noise amazing?

The noise was a WHOOMP!

Interviewer: And that was the end of it? They closed all of it then?

Yes. It never worked again, but I don't know if you ever knew anything about the time all the coal started burning? Just over here. They had a washing plant in. They didn't know to get permission. They had hundreds and hundreds of tons of coal stone – well, some of it's got a bit of coal on it, and I don't know whether the children or somebody started a fire at the bottom, and it got into it, and all you could smell was the coal smoke and people around, too. It was that thick, it used to dirty the washing.

This was near where the mine was. That's where they dumped it, because it was all open ground. I don't know how many millions it cost to shift the whole damned lot.

I think it started with a bit of a fire down at the bottom, but it was some weeks. This was about seven or eight years ago.

That's the last time anybody came to see me, because Paul Pisasale, the Mayor, he came round. They wanted to know, using heavy machinery, where the tunnels were. I said to him, well, I wasn't getting around too good then –

I couldn't, without this; I could get around with a stick – but I explained to him and he wrote it down. He said, "I can see where you mean now," and he was satisfied, so they could watch when they got to there, that they didn't go down the start of a tunnel. Once you got in you wouldn't, because you'd have a big whatsisname above it.

Tape 2

We used to get stuck in one of the tunnels, shifting the pump, and we brought in a 415v, and a mess, it was. They had an electrician working as a miner. He wasn't doing his trade, and he used to get stuck.

And then above it there was a fault and it started to come down, and the men were working that day, because we were going to timber it. I carted a heap of timber down and when I got down there I couldn't get through. It had fallen down.

So there used to be a little seam above it. The water was coming down and the pump was below it. We had to get it, and we had to take it through with the trolley, pulling it, the pump and the big motor, until we got above it. After we did, we lifted the motor, the fish plates as they call them, where they join up, because you don't want them out – you go down with a big hammer, one holds it and the other belts it, and you just chop them off, you know. We got the rope through a few of them, and just pull them off, and you know, flood in.

Interviewer: What tunnel was that one?

That was the old main one. The river flooded it worse. It wasn't '74. It was before that. It went down this way, and they run another one down that way towards the river. It fell in. When it started getting a bit rusty looking in the coal, they were getting boats to the surface to see where the seam showed up. Then Woodend mine was the same seam. It blew up and four were killed in the explosion. I was just going to work that morning and I just happened to look across and I saw it.

Interviewer: You saw the blow?

I saw the blow of black dust.

Interviewer: So was it good coal around North Ipswich?

Reasonable. Ours was a bit dirty, but the little seam, that's the one that fell in, came down the fault, it was better coal – but it was only about that depth. See, the highest we worked was only 5ft 3in. About 6ft. 6in to 7ft would be a good height.

In 5ft. 3 you couldn't stand up.

There's not much left. It didn't seem much after they pulled the pithead down, just further down. But when I started, the old original main line to Toowoomba through Brassall. The regional line used to run over there. They'd had bridges, but all the

Railway's dirt and rubbish was out so we filled that up and filled it up.

It was about a chain wide in the end, and we had rails in further down that they couldn't bring the loco down until it settled down a bit. We had a wire rope and they'd run back and forth. After it settled, they'd just push them in, you know. But we had a storm, and where the ovens out here were, they put up a breeze brick wall, but they never put openings if any wet gone in, and the damned thing collapsed. You couldn't get wagons in or anything.

Interviewer: So what did you build the wall for?

Just to hold it back, you know, this open ground. That opening down below, you know, blew out. It took the whole damned lot of us working to clean it up.

It had a lot of red clay – mongrel stuff to try and shift. It would have been all right if we'd had a tractor with a scoop. That's what you wanted.

Originally the old crowd must have had a line running onto the Toowoomba line, the original old one. There was this long thing, used to have a rifle range there, a small bore rifle range. My father even shot there. That was where the top chute was for the coke.

Interviewer: It came in by rail?

Yes. The rail came right across the railway line, around the bin, up past the coal chute, and up for the coke. We did put another chute in where that collapsed down there, with this other oven above it; otherwise, you wouldn't have got around. It was a lot easier working there than working the other way.

Interviewer: And that was the newer one down there?

Yes, that was the last.