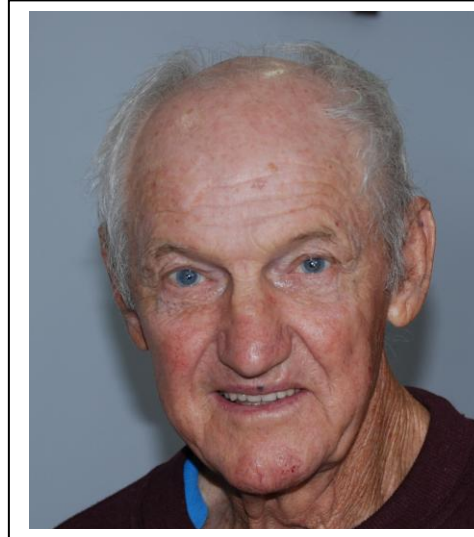


Lou and Ross Spark

Date of Interview: 2010

Interviewer: Margaret Cook



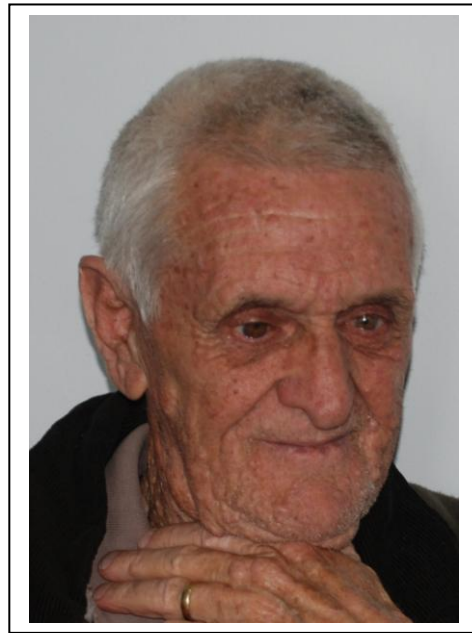
Lou Spark

Lou Spark is identified as LS
Ross Spark is identified as RS
Hazel Spark is identified as HS
The interviewer is Margaret Cook (MC)

My name is Louis Spark but I am called Lou. I started work at Rylance Collieries. I only called it “the dump.” During World War II the Yanks had a dump there for their ammunition. It was at Ebbw Vale.

I joined the mine in 1947, just after the war, when I was 15. I went to the woollen mill for 12 months after school because I couldn’t start at the mines until I was older, and I started out there with my elder brother, George. He’s passed away now.

There was only a little bit of a mine down in the ground, and it was all white-wash, from top to bottom, as white as snow, the pit down below. Floor, roof, the ribs and everything. Of course, it didn’t last long like



Ross Spark

that when they started mining coal. I was there for about 15 years. We took all the coal out, and the pillars, and it all fell in there, right round. We broke into old mines there. When they were worked I don’t know, but it came from the other side of the hill.

There was a tunnel. When we broke through there we found old tallow lights and wooden rail and things like that.

It was a very, very old mine. In that time they didn't use to take slack – that's real fine coal. All they wanted was the lumps, but we could fill slack and everything. In the middle of their boards there – that's the roadways they drove – it was about 4m wide, and they used to stack all the slack up into the roof. It was only about four feet high and they left two feet of coal on the bottom because it was a bit dirty, and they used to stack all this slack up there and just fill out the lumps.

When we broke through into there, we shot up that bit of bottoms and pulled the slack and everything out, so it was good working, but very, very dusty.

One of the pits had a dag on. You could only fill so much coal and then you were finished, couldn't fill any more. At our pit it was 24 wagons. That was for two men – 12 if you're a single. The wagons used to weigh about 14 cwt. when they were full because they used to stack their lumps around the top when it was full and then fill a bit more round, and pack the lumps around until they got it up. They could weigh up to nearly a ton weight.

So they used to do that, and then they decided after so long that that was no good. Instead of stacking these lumps

on there, they'd raise the dag and they'd give you more coal and fill 30 wagons.

When I started there I was tipping for a while. I was tipping the coal when it came up and boiling the billy to send down to the miners. We bathed in an old waterhole down in the gully there for a while and then they built a bathroom.

After a while on tipping I got on the rope. I used to ride down the pit. The fellow that was on there, he went onto the coal in his turn. I would ride down and bring the full ones up and then down. I did all that until I was old enough to go down and I worked with the ponies.

RS: I started off at New Chum, driving the pit ponies. We had all our sets in. My run was about 600m in to the men. I just had two, and four sets, take a dag in, you worked the dag out. I started in 1951. It was good coal. It used to go straight to Darra to be burnt, like, most of it.

When you worked on the ponies you'd run the pony in and out with their wagons. Then later on I went on the tunnel, and that's when I worked for about 15 years on the shovelling coal. We took all that coal out then we'd break through into an old mine, and took out all the pillars, until she fell in.

At New Chum I had a fortnight on the line bringing the wagons in, then driving the pit pony. There were two

sections. They used to call it Hill 60 where I was. There were four horses working up there and there were five in the race called Seventy Foot. You'd drive into Seventy Foot, where we used to go in there, about 50m or 100m long, there was a big dinosaur footprint in the room. They had a big clay well where there was a volcanic eruption and we used to go in there.

At New Chum they picked up a stone that was round about 2 inches in diameter, and they cracked it open and there was a frog in it, and it hopped about 2m. It was nearly white, with a little brown on it. They found them at Rosewood too. An old chap I used to know over at the bowling club, worked up at Rosewood in a place up there, and I told him about it. He said, "I'm glad you said it, because," he said, "they thought I was mad," because they found it up at Rosewood in the coal. So how many millions of years have they been there? They didn't tell anyone because if they said it to the university they'd stop them from working. Every wagon was a quid. You only got paid for what you did.

RS: I was conscripted into the Army in the second intake in 1954.

LS: I was conscripted in 1951 from the Gully, the very first lot to go in.

RS: When I came out I went back onto contract till the retrenchments started, then I went and worked outside for about four years. I went up to

Blackwater to help with the shaft there for the coal at Blackwater, came back to No. 2. From No. 2 we went to New Hope. Rylance owned the mine. From there I went to their other pit over at North Ipswich No. 2, because the first one was finished.

RS: Rylance owned about four mines.

LS: Rylance was quite big. I went out there and of course mechanisation was starting to come in then. I was on the scraper loaders where they scraped the coal out on chains. Of course, out there it was quite different to over here, over the gully. It was 18 to 20ft high out there.

At No. 2, North Ipswich, a lot of it had been worked, eight feet of it had been worked underneath, and we used to drop the other lot, you know, where it wasn't solid, and then loaded it all out.

No. 2 is where they got the Joy loaders, and the Joy cars for awhile – didn't have the miner – and they let them down in pieces down the shaft. They built them underground in the pit. They would load the coal out with them.

MC: How many men were working at the North Ipswich mine, No. 2?

LS: It was quite big. When we finished at No. 5 and went to work at No. 2, we sort of made an extra shift. All from our pit, No. 5, the Gully, went over there. None of the men were left, they went on the night shift. A couple of

hundred men worked there. More than at New Chum and I think there were 300 at the Chum one time, on day shift.

I was there until about 1960 when No. 2 mine was running out of orders and coal. They just shut the pit down, and that's when I went to New Hope Colleries, and that's where all the Sparks worked. A lot of them worked out there. We all went out there to New Hope.

There were 14 Sparks (6 Brothers and two sons of Lou; 4 cousins and two sons and 5 nephews) that worked at New Hope when we were there.

LS: I had 22 relations at New Hope. The six brothers were George, Dick, Louis (Lou), Ross, Clinton and Colin. My two sons Gary and Wayne worked there. My cousins Cecil, Jimmy, Morrie (or Maurie) and Neville worked there along with Cecil's son (Cecil Junior) and Jimmy's son Rodney. My brother-in-law, Col Woods worked at New Hope as did his nephews Bruce Woods (Col's son); John Milford; Tommy Milford; Greg Friese and Murray Friese. Our father and grandfather worked in the mines too.

At New Hope we went onto the Joy miner. We used it to cut the coal down and load it out, into cars and onto belts. That was mechanised. It was supposed to be easier, but it was a lot harder for a start. It did get easier than shovelling coal all day.

MC: Why was it such hard work?

LS: You had a lot of lifting when I went there, big crowns up to the roof, and then we bolted them up by hand, bored the holes up in the sandstone. It was very hard.

RS: Some of the crowns were as big as telephone poles. We were using timber props and we used to have to put them in. We had to put in another driveway and we used to have to lift the crowns up.

MC: I thought mechanisation might have made it easier.

LS: Well, it did later on, yes, when they brought in the steel straps. One man could carry one of them easily. Then they'd put them on the miner, on the jacks, and push them to the roof, and then we had water jacks to bore the holes and that made it a lot easier.

MC: Some people have told me that they liked the timber props and pillars because you could hear creaking. You sound like you liked the new ones?

LS: The new ones were better.

RS: When you got used to them. We didn't trust them for a while.

LS: We used to listen to the timber when we took the pillars out. They would be creaking and cracking, and they'd break. When it was time to go,

you'd get out and go to a safe place until it fell in.

MC: Who owned New Hope when you were there in the 1970s?

LS: Merv Harris was the owner. He's still got pits going, I think, Mervyn. While I was at Rylance No. 2, Channel 2 television came out there when we started mechanisation, and they set up all their lights down in the pit and they took a photo of the miner loading coal, the loader loading all the coal out. It was on air there.

MC: Because it was new technology?

LS: Yes. New Hope was totally mechanised. I had about 18 years at New Hope until I retired. I have been finished for 20 years.

MC: Was New Hope affected by the 1974 floods?

LS: No. Haighmoor was flooded out. They had to close as it was full of water.

MC: When the floods came were the men re-deployed or did they lose their jobs?

LS: No, they started up again after so long. They were probably stood down – I don't remember – until they got the pit cleaned out, pumped out and that, and started off again.

MC: It was a big loss?

LS: Yes.

MC: So did you see any accidents in your time?

LS: Yeah, when I was over at the Gully there, I used to work with the miners and the Deputy over there. That's all they had over there to work the pit, the Manager and the Deputy. They managed the whole pit – not like today. Now they are over-run with managers and staff. Aussie Wooley was the Deputy's name. He was a nice fellow. Well, he transferred over to No. 2 when I went over there. One evening, one night shift over there, he was in one of the boards over there – like I say, it was that high, 20ft high – and while he was in there walking past, the whole rib came over on top of him and it killed him. We dug him out, and the doctor came down, but it was no good.

Then there was Harris, a Deputy again. Whatever happened I don't know, but he was making up charges. He was a Deputy and he used to make up the charges to put in the holes to shoot the coal down. He was sitting out there where we used to load the coal on to the left making up charges, and next minute the whole box of gelly went – PHOOM! – off. My brother, Dick, was at the tail end where they load the coal that time, and his ears were bleeding, but he was the only one that got an injury.

We went down the next day and loaded out where Harris, the Deputy, was, and

found about two pounds of him, that's all, pieces over the props. So that's two fatalities.

RS: When I was driving the pit pony, my first accident was that Georgie Allen. They used to cut the coal and take the bottoms out. Well, he ended up and was right underneath, squatted down, and it just dropped him. Georgie Allen got killed in the bottom of the road down there.

Gennon was killed in the shaft at New Hope.

LS: They brought in an incentive pay.

RS: Stink pay. That's what they used to call it.

MC: Why did they call it stink pay?

RS: Well, you had to work a fortnight straight with no time off before you got an extra day's pay.

LS: Yeah, you had to work a full fortnight, and they paid you an extra day, but if you had a day off in that fortnight, you'd lose the whole lot. It was to keep people at work and not take any time off. What the miners wanted was that if you had a day off, they'd take one day, you know, a portion of it off. No way in the world. They wouldn't do that. So over where we were, I think we went about two years, we never worked a full week, in protest.

RS: We got one day in two years.

MC: So that resulted in some strikes?

RS: A day a week.

MC: A day a week? So they sort of lost out then, didn't they?

LS: Well, so did we.

RS: Yes, they sent us over our summaries, we used to have two days.

LS: They wouldn't give in, and the miners wouldn't give in, and that's how it went on and on until they settled it one way or another. I don't remember how.

RS: I don't remember. They incorporated it into the pay.

LS: Something like that – which should have been done in the first place.

RS: Should have been there in the first place.

MC: Two years that took?

LS: Yes.

MC: So were you both involved in the union?

RS: You had to be a member of the union but I didn't join the committee.

LS: I was Chairman for a little while, over the Gully, only because they couldn't get anybody else.

MC: *And were you involved in any of the mining social activities?*

LS: No, only in our own group at New Hope.

RS: We were in the Social Club for five years.

LS: Christmas Clubs and things like that. We used to have a pretty big do, didn't we?

RS: That's right.

MC: *Each mine had a separate one?*

LS: Yes. We'd do in all the year, the men would, and at the end of the year we'd go down and buy all the kids presents, and they'd have a do out at the Showgrounds Hall. We used to go out to the river too, one time for Christmas and picnics.

RS: And Kholo.

LS: We went there, out to the Showgrounds and had a Christmas Tree for the kids out there.

RS: Then the miners, anybody that retired, we had retirement parties.

MC: *And that was the same contribution each week that got used for that?*

RS: Yes.

LS: Then down at West End Football Club House it was a pretty big do, you

know, we used to go to Jimmy Wah's and buy Chinese food.

MC: *Where was Jimmy Wah's?*

HS: He had a Chinese shop, you know where Coles in town is now? Then he moved over to North side.

LS: He's gone now, but in there, that's where he was. We used to get big pots of Chinese curried prawns and all that sort of stuff. They had a hell of a time.

LS: Ross, you left New Hope and went up to Tieri in the Central Queensland Highlands?

RS: New Hope was starting retrenchments. I went up to Tieri.

RS: I went up Moura for awhile and I was working on the overburden drill up there, went up to Tieri and worked on the overburden drill at the end of that. I was Check Inspector for awhile, you know, that's nothing.

MC: *Was it a reasonable wage?*

RS: Yes, it was reasonable.

LS: When Gough Whitlam got into power (as Prime Minister) with the Labor Party, he nearly doubled our wages. It was just as much money earned outside as we were earning in the pits.

RS: We went down and down and down till we just about equalled out,

and that's quite true. Gough Whitlam doubled our pay, but the poor bugger didn't last long after that.

HS: You were on contract, too.

RS: Contract, yes, when we filled our day, you know. When we were on contract there, like my father, they used to fill their coal if they had a dag on and you'd be home at half past 1.00 or 2.00 o'clock. That's when you sat down for your dinner, a cooked dinner. We still have a main meal in the middle of the day to this day.

LS: We used to have ours at 3.00 o'clock at home. Tea was on the table at 3.00 o'clock, and we'd have supper about half past six.

RS: There were ten in the family and there was Mum and Dad, Granny.

LS: There were six boys and four girls.

LS: Well, some days down home Mum used to have 30 for dinner.

MC: What was mining like for the wives?

LS: Bloody good.

MC: No, seriously, it's dangerous work.

HS: It's worrying work. Dirty washing.

RS: We used to always have a bath at the pit. We came home in clean clothes but the work clothes were dirty.

MC: What about safety gear?

LS: None. I just started with just an ordinary cap, you know, and a carbide light on the top.

MC: Boots?

LS: No, no, sandshoes to go down.

RS: A pair a week.

LS: Yes, you wore them out.

MC: Did you really go through a pair a week?

RS: When I drove the pit ponies I used to, and working with a cuddie.

LS: That was true.

MC: And you supplied them? The mines didn't?

LS: No, we had to buy our own. They were cheap, that's why.

RS: Then they made us wear boots. A lot of them – including Dad –worked barefeet.

MC: Some of the mines were really hot, so you didn't wear a lot of clothes?

LS: No, you'd work in just your underpants. Two-thirds shifts, they used to call it. There was no air going through. It used to be that blooming hot you went in and worked for an hour, and you came out for 20 minutes

or something, to cool down. Then you worked again.

RS: You were supposed to do that, but they never used to do it.

RS: No. So what did you do – just drink a lot?

LS: Yes. But that didn't go on too long until they just kicked up all together and just wouldn't go to work.

MC: So was New Hope a good company to work for?

RS: Yes.

LS: Yes, very good. I really enjoyed it. Everything was pretty free and easy going out there, wasn't it, the men and that.

MC: And the bosses were good?

LS: The bosses were good.

RS: Yes, they were all good out there.

LS: There were plenty of them.

RS: Ebenezer is the one that's going, and there's a big cry, they want to open a mine up near Emerald, and they're out somewhere just outside of Toowoomba, somewhere near Oakey, yes. It's closing down. They want to come in to the old town somewhere there.

RS: Up at Oakey Creek, I was there when I had a heart attack up there, and never went down below no more. They had a long wheel system, and the long wheel system now, it's two big wheel and it just takes it out. It takes more coal out in one day than you'd put out in five years on contract.

MC: We don't have any long wall here?

RS: No. They're very steep out here. We were three mile underground.

LS: Yeah, down under the Redbank Plains School.

RS: It's 3,000 ft straight down.

MC: So how long did it take you to get from pit top to pit bottom for work?

RS: About half an hour. It would take over an hour to walk out, and if you had to walk out – oh, boy! It was uphill all the way with a gradient of one in three all the way.

RS: We never worked on the shaft. I've just worked up there when they've put the shaft there and we just went down and hit the coal, and that was it.

LS: You used to ride it out with a shuttle car with a Joy car for a start until they got, probably got to about 100 yards, and then they started putting the belts in.

RS: The belting all the way down there.

MC: So your children have gone into the mines as well?

RS: I got one lad working. He's at Dalby now up there, and three up north.

MC: So all your brothers went into the mines?

LS: Yes, all six. Lou's son Gary was a miner at Middlemount. He's retired. The electrician, Wayne, is at Bundorra at Middlemount. Daryl was an electrician at Rhondda and Blackwater and now at Dalby. Errol is a miner at Bundorra at Middlemount.