

Warren Brown

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Interviewer: Margaret Cook

Assisted by Bevan Kathage



I joined the mining industry in 1961 under a Coal Board scheme designed to entice young people into the industry which included surveyors, mine managers and trades apprentices such as fitters and electricians. Approximately 12 to 15 young people, new blood, were inducted in my intake which was a makeup of the above trades. The induction was for a three month probationary period during which time we attended technical college for 2 to 3 days per week and were exchanged between various mining companies for the balance of the period. At the end of the 3 months, various positions were made available by the mining companies for which we could apply. I applied and was successful in gaining a cadet surveying position with William McQueen & Company at Box Flat Extended Collieries. From there we were educated at the Ipswich Technical College in our chosen field of career. The trades apprentices went through

the normal technical college and the mining people, such as trainee managers and cadet surveyors, went through a joint Coal Board/ Education Department arrangement.

Interviewer: In that three months you stayed in the same place or you moved around?

I mainly stayed at Box Flat because at the time I think that they were the only mining company who employed a full time surveyor. I think I did a small amount of time at Southern Cross but that may have been accompanying the Box Flat surveyor who worked part time for Southern Cross. I applied for a position as a cadet surveyor which was advertised in the local paper, probably the State's papers as well. I was successful with my application and was inducted into the three months probationary scheme with the intention of studying surveying and was employed full time at Box Flat as a cadet surveyor after the three months.

Interviewer: Were you paid in your three month probationary period? A reasonable wage?

Yes. £3 or £4 a week, or something like that.

Interviewer: Was this a state wide scheme?

The mining industry was in its infancy in Central Queensland. The big mining centres were Ipswich and Collinsville. At that stage I don't think Moura was operating.

Bevan Kathage: No it started in 1961 with open cut.

Interviewer: Why did the government need this influx of people? Was the industry growing?

The industry was changing from hand workings to mechanisation so they were attempting to enticing young people to join and be trained in the skilled areas of the industry such as surveyors, managers, fitters, electricians and so on.

Bevan Kathage: The industry changed after 1949 when there was a big report done by the British which pointed the way of the future for the coal industry and how if Queensland was to expand then production had to increase beyond what had been pulled out during the war years. Remember that there was no investment during the war years.

Interviewer: With mechanisation coming in was it also recognition that they needed a different skill pool?

That was the purpose of enticing new blood, particularly the maintenance people, the fitters and the electricians into the industry. Prior to that fitters and electricians would have been a very small, minority group in the industry.

Bevan Kathage: It begs the question, did you have family working in the industry?

No that was the other thing, most people who joined the industry were second or third generation miners. I was a first generation.

Interviewer: What attracted you to mining?

The surveying. I always wanted to do surveying. At the time I had two opportunities. One was with Main Roads and the other one was with the mining industry which I elected to pursue. I guess at the time I based my decision on not living my life in a tent in the backblocks of Australia so to speak. I wanted to enjoy the comforts of coming home and enjoying a hot meal every night and my parents looking after and guiding me. I decided to go with the coal mining industry.

Interviewer: So you could stay in your home town. What were McQueen's doing when you joined them? What sort of size were they?

My knowledge of McQueen and Company is that William McQueen was an old Scottish miner. He came out here in the late 1800s. I think a lot of Scots and Welsh miners settled in the Ipswich area, some of them working at

the Mt Crosby waterworks as boiler attendants – engine drivers. I am sure he was one of those. On weekends they used to prospect because of their coal mining background. I think William McQueen was fortunate in discovering some of the better seams of coal in the Ipswich area at Swanbank.

Bevan Kathage: After the Aberdare.

He also mined the Aberdare seam in the beginning. That is where he first started.

Bevan Kathage: Thomas usually had the best.

Yes. McQueen and old Lewis Thomas. The seams that he mined were probably superior – same seams mind you – but the quality was a lot better in the areas he selected. Our washing plant reject from Box Flat before the explosion was as little as 8 to 10%. I think most mines in the Ipswich area were rejecting 20% or 30%.

Bevan Kathage : We were losing 50%.

That was over a long period of time. I started as cadet surveyor, consequently on a daily basis I collected all the production and discard figures and over many, many years if it increased above 10-12% it was alarming. My understanding was that William McQueen had five children. The youngest offspring was Bob McQueen who took over the running of the mine after his father. He lived to an age of 99 years only dieing approximately 15 - 20

years ago. I began at Box Flat under his directorship.

I came into the industry more or less just after the beginning of mechanisation. Box Flat was the leader in Queensland at the time as far as mechanisation goes. Everyone else in the Ipswich area were playing catch up which was very difficult for them too do considering that he had a number of years start and on top of that he had such good seams with high grade coal and good seam thicknesses particularly for mechanisation.

When I started at the mine he had three tunnels – No 7 which was in the Wright seam. It followed the coal seam from the outcrop. Like most Ipswich mines they were productive from within a couple of months of turning soil. He had one continuous miner, two conventional units and a scraper loader working in the No 7 tunnel The scraper loader was being phased out and I think it probably only lasted two or three months after I started.

The No 5 tunnel entered the Bluff seam again following the outcrop from the surface. The Bluff was a much thicker seam, at approximately 10 meters, than the Wright, which was approximately 5-6 meters. The Bluff seam or No 5 tunnel had two conventional units and one continuous miner working. The No 5 and No 7 tunnels incidentally were interconnected with stone drives there being approximately 100 feet vertical

separation between the two seams. The purpose of these stone drives or interconnections was for ventilation, servicing and supplies (that sort of thing). It was quite easy to get between the two seams.

The third mine was No 6. So you had No 5, 6 and 7. No 6 was in a pocket which had been cut off by major faulting and it was also mining the Bluff seam using the scraper loader system. The seam was too steep for mechanisation. It closed in about 1962. As I recall there was a heating. The Bluff seam was a very fiery seam which had a spontaneous heating problem. There was a heating, not necessarily a fire, so they closed it, sealing it off at the surface. It was at the back end of its life anyway.

Interviewer: That was a huge injection of capital so they must have been successful.

It was before my time but he was the first to mechanise with scraper loaders while the other companies were still hand mining – pick and shovel. He had those old scraper loaders discarded everywhere on the surface. He probably sold some to other companies around the area. He probably was the leader in the coal mining industry in Queensland at the time.

Interviewer: What was Bob McQueen like?

He was a very tough business person. He was the person mainly responsible for Swanbank power station being sited, behind the Box Flat mines.

Obviously others had input into the siting of the power station as well. In actual fact he was noted in the New Years' Honours list or Queen's Birthday list for his dedication to the coal mining industry in Ipswich in getting Swanbank power sited where it is adjacent to his mines.

BK: He got a British Empire Medal from that. The other thing that is interesting about Bob McQueen is that he paid for the Bundamba swimming pool.

And the showgrounds. Initially the Ipswich Showgrounds was just a small circular track. Early in my career, probably 1962 or 1963, the surveyor and myself surveyed and laid out the existing oval track. Bob supplied all the material, mainly coal stone reject, the machinery, dozers end loaders and trucks, with their operators to form the track. He did the same for the Coalstars football club at Bundamba. He filled the creek flats and levelled it out to make a playing field again supplying machinery and personnel.

Interviewer: So he was community minded?

Yes, community minded.

Back at the mine, he continued his expansion programme by phasing out the labour intensive less productive conventional units and replacing them with continuous miners. This was done during the construction of the power station which was commissioned in approximately 1966/7.

BK: I thought it as earlier than that.

1965 maybe.

BK: That was only Swanbank A station. Swanbank B was 1973/4.

Consequently there were a lot of changes made at Box flat during that period. Production was increased over the next few years in preparation for the up-and-coming power station.

One of the major changes, outside of the purchase of more continuous miners and associated equipment, was the driving of a conveyor tunnel from the surface to intersect with the existing underground workings. Before this tunnel was driven, all of the coal won from the coal faces was transported by rubber conveyor belts to a large underground storage bin. It was then transported from this bin to the surface by way of a rail mounted haulage system called an alligators. These were 5 ton wagons which were filled by a hydraulic system controlled by one man and pulled by a double drum electric haulage system to the surface where it was automatically emptied into a large surface bin. One of the alligators was down the bottom being filled as the other was automatically unloaded on reaching the surface.

Interviewer: Not needing manpower to unload.

No. Once the one below was filled, the double drum haulage system pulled that

one to the surface while the empty one was lowered acting as a counter weight as well. One being pulled up as the other being lowered at the same time. They were about 5 ton skips. At this time, all the coal was brought from underground to the surface in both No 5 and No 7 mines using this alligator system. Then in 1963/4 the conveyor tunnel was driven. A stone drive, was driven at a grade of approximately 1 in 3, from behind the No 5 tunnel winding house and in direct line with the existing tunnel, for the purpose of installing the surface to underground conveyor system. This incline broke into the No 5 haulage tunnel at a point approximately 400 meters from the outcrop and the underground to surface conveyor system was installed and the change over from alligator to conveyor completed during a Christmas shutdown period. Following that shutdown all coal was transported from the No 5 mine to the surface by a conveyor belt while the No 7 mine continued using the alligator system.

Interviewer: Was the alligator system put in before your time or was that part of the upgrading?

The alligator system was operating in both tunnels when I was employed. Most of the mines in Ipswich Rosewood area were still skip winding at this time. These were small one ton skips, or less, with a manual tipping system on the surface.

Interviewer: He really was ahead of the game?

Yes. Box Flat was the most mechanised mine in Qld. at the time even after the Moura mine started. Moura and Box Flat would have been on par I guess, but I don't think Moura would have had a higher standard of mechanisation – neither did Collinsville.

Interviewer: Did he open up other mines?

I feel that he felt very comfortable in his position. He was probably mining about 5000 ton a day and 100% of his output was going directly to the power station, with only 10% reject. He would have been very comfortable so he didn't see, in my opinion, any need to expand in the local area.

We tried to expand in 1966/7 in the Central Qld. area. We applied for and was granted a prospecting licence in the Blackwater/ Tolmies area. An old mine manager, Hugh Brown, and myself spent 12 to 18 months prospecting this area. We used to go up there for a month at a time over the 18 month period. Unfortunately it was a barren area and we were unsuccessful in our quest.

BK: Not a good area.

Unfortunately not. Hugh who was about 75 years of age who was a trusted and retired manager from Box Flat was a very secretive old guy who wanted to protect our reason for being in the area. Possibly if we had of been more open and spoken with the local farmers or graziers, who were constantly drilling

water bores, we may have been given some good information regarding the whereabouts of any intersected coal seams. If we happened to find any coal, old Hughie would grind it up in the back yard of the pub where we were boarding and burn it to try and determine if it had any swelling index. We did it at the back of the hotel so that no one would know what we were doing. All we had to do was be open with the locals and ask for any information.

I do blame Hughie for our failure but to be kind and honest we had a barren licence area. I might add that the big guys such as Utah had previously pegged extremely large licence areas from which they picked the eyes out off. In reality there wasn't a great deal left for the smaller guys like ourselves. Over time they forfeited sections of the prospecting licences. Initially the concentration of mines was in and around Blackwater itself but over time a lot of mines were developed in more remote areas. These areas were also unavailable because they were under other companies prospecting licence at the time. Unless prospecting licences are worked and have ongoing monies spent on them they or portions of them are forfeited thus giving other interested companies or parties an opportunity of obtaining the forfeited licence. A lot of good mines have been developed from these forfeited licences.

BK: The Utah geologists have to be given their due recognition for their ability to pick the eyes out of the whole of the Bowen Basin – Blackwater, Goonyella, Peak Downs, Doris Park, Scarjee. The best of the best and everyone else got what was left over.

Utah initially had a blanket cover over the entire Bowen Basin area.

BK: They only picked those five areas – they picked the outcrops and to a depth. They picked it was 300 metres deep and they could start from there.

McQueen tended to lose interest in the project. It was only over a short period of time, maximum 2 years. We would have spent a fair bit of time up there in total and spent a bit of money as well mainly in drilling expenses. It wasn't to be. Early in the game, but after our attempt, one could have picked up Utah's rejected licences and finish up with a very successful coal mine.

After the conveyor belt was commissioned in the No5 tunnel production was ramped up for the commissioning of the power station. The alligator system had limitations as to how much coal could be transported from underground to the surface. The next stage was to increase the number of underground production sections and thus an increase in mining machinery and man power. I think we had 7 or 8 continuous miners – not all operating at the same time. A couple of them were probably being rebuilt in the surface workshop. He phased the

conventional units out which had limitations, more difficult to manage and needed more manpower.

BK: They were labour intensive. You needed twice as many blokes on a conventional unit than on a miner unit.

They were also more difficult to ventilation than the continuous miner sections where all the ventilation was directed to the one coal face instead of multiple faces.

Interviewer: When would he have got those in?

1964 to 1968 era.

Interviewer: How many men did he employ?

I think approximately 150 in its hay day. Things were sailing beautifully. In 1971 I had the joy of opening a development mine which was called No8. It was in the Wright seam and targeted a small area of coal which had been isolated by faulting. We followed the coal seam down from the outcrop in a cross dip direction so as to reduce the grade of the drives for the purpose of operating rubber tyred supply vehicles. There was a lot of faulting and it was a very difficult area to mine but we were on the coal when disaster struck on 31 July 1972. That was the 1972 explosion where 17 men lost their lives.

There was a heating which ignited into a fire which resulted in a violent coal dust explosion. Both No5 and No7

mines were lost on the day. The problem was in No5 mine but because of the interconnections between No5 and No7 they both had to be sealed at the surface and to my knowledge the seals have never been breached. The loss of life and damage was unbelievable. 17 men lost their lives, some entombed underground and a few at the tunnel entries. High surface structures, bins, alligators, and buildings were severely damaged or destroyed.

Interviewer: Were they blown out?

Yes. Consequently that explosion had an immediate affected on the mining industry in Ipswich. The rest of the mines weren't up to speed and were unable to supply the requirements needed by the power station, thus the importing of coal from Central Queensland commenced.

Tape Two

BK: The unloading dock at Swanbank was put in after the explosion. Llew Edwards was the Member then.

From there it was a struggle. From there, Bob McQueen commenced seriously looking at what open cut coal was available in Box Flat leases. He had a lot of leases where underground mining had finished many years before, for instance the Aberdare seam and others to the north. That is where old William McQueen had started 70 or 100 years earlier. All of these old underground mines were then

reopened as open cuts. No 6 mine which was closed because of the heating in 1961 eventually also had the top lifted off it and was mined by open cut method as well. In the meantime No8 became the only underground production mine. So times were tough. A lot of men were retrenched.

BK: It all affected Bob McQueen himself.

The mining industry in Ipswich expanded. All the other mines in the area increased the number of shifts. While they may have been on one productive shift and a maintenance shift prior to the explosion, they immediately maximised production by increasing man power and working three shifts per day. They employed the guys that we were forced to retrenched. None of them were out of work. They were all immediately employed at the other Ipswich mines.

Interviewer: That is impressive.

BK: That is the way it worked.

Interviewer: Was that a deliberate thing? It was fortunate that you were expanding

To expand they needed the man power. The union books would have been immediately closed to protect the men who were to be retrenched. So the other mining companies had no choice, but remember the men that they getting were all trained in their own field such as colliery staff, deputies, underground miners, electricians and fitters. They

were all trained and experienced in underground mining.

BK: It was all driven by the fact that the allocation that Box Flat had needed to be supplied from somewhere. That tonnage had to be made up by other suppliers. That led to the original three – Box Flat, Southern Cross and New Hope would expand to Rhondda to move on to Westfalen and Aberdare. All mines in Ipswich were focused on supplying coal to Swanbank to make up supply.

During this time Box Flat survived on what cash reserves they had, plus production from the open cut plus the No8 underground. I would suspect that No8 probably was not making money in these early stages following the explosion. It wasn't productive enough. Incidentally, prior to the explosion Box Flat was working two or three production shifts per day. We struggled on. It was a huge loss. It was a total change for everyone at Box Flat and even for the guys who were re-employed by the other mines.

Interviewer: And they lost their friends.

Some of those guys had probably been there all their lives and they had to move to other mines and thus new work mates. We soldiered on with one miner on three production shifts in the No8 mine plus the open cut.

A new mine was planned to enter a lower seam again which was the Lagoon seam. This mine No9 was driven in from the outcrop from

behind the existing surface treatment plant infrastructure. It was driven at an angle of approximately 30 degrees off dip so as to reduce the grades to suit mechanisation but in a similar direction to the No5 and No7 mines. The supply and return air tunnels followed the outcrop from the surface but the conveyor belt tunnel was driven in stone at a grade of 1 in 2.85, which was very steep for a conveyor belt. At approximately 500-600 meters underground this stone drive intersected the coal seam. This seam was approximately 80 to 100 feet below the Wright seam and was Box Flats lowest seam. It proved to be difficult mining conditions with regards the steep grades and lengthy stone drive. It took a number of years to develop the mine to a reasonable production level.

The entire Box Flat underground and open cut mines, machinery, infrastructure and leases were sold to Westfalen group which was owned by Bundaberg Sugar in 1977. I think the change over took place during the Christmas maintenance period of 1977.

It took a number of years from the start to get the No9 mine to where it could be classed as a productive mine. It was a lengthy exercise and I was in charge of it for the majority of the time. Alec Lawrie was made manager of the No8 mine, as he was considered to be the main production manger and I was given the job of developing this new No9 mine. Box flat operations were sold more or less within months of the

conveyor tunnel intersecting the coal seam and the three entries being linked together in coal, the hard work having been completed at this point.

Interviewer: They sold just the No 9 mine?

They bought the lot, No9 underground, open cuts, leases, treatment plant, machinery and surface buildings which included offices workshops etc. I think the story was that Bundaberg Sugar wanted an entry into coal mining industry in Queensland. The cheapest way of doing that was to buy an existing mine and the cheapest mines were in the Ipswich/Rosewood areas. So they initially bought Westfalen who in turn bought Box Flat a couple of years later.

In the meantime, following the Box Flat disaster by eighteen months, there was the 1974 floods. A lot of the underground mines were flooded including Westfalen, Aberdare No8 and the Tivoli Mines – Haighmore, Rylance and Moreton Extended. Of these the only one that was re-opened was Westfalen No3. Consequently the mining industry in Ipswich was thrown into disarray once again. To cover the shortfall in production from the flooded mines the rail link was used to import coal from other areas. This continued until Swanbank became a peak load station due to the Joh Bjelke-Petersen government over-estimated the power requirements throughout Queensland.

BK: There are a lot of politics there. It was a Labor town even though Llew Edwards was the Member. What you are alluding to is that Job then pushed to get Tarong power station built. The sad part is that the cost of production down here was much less than production in open pit. It was an excuse to walk away.

Once Swanbank became a peak load station it didn't need the input of coal because of Tarong coming on stream, which fed power into the distribution grid. Swanbank became obsolete and was only fired up as required at the peak requirement times.

Interviewer: You left the industry then?

On 30 June 1987 Westfalen and Box Flat were closed down. I think the government bought the contracts out. I have no doubt that Beres Evans the managing director of the company had a hand in organising that buyback. I would consider that Beres, in the eyes of Bundaberg Sugar board, would have been highly recognised for his involvement in this direction. It all happened very quickly, we were only given one or two weeks notice and the majority of the workforce was retrenched and the mines sealed at the tunnel entries on the surface. The water and power was disconnected at the surface. Everything else remained underground excepting the diesel powered rubber tyred vehicles.

BK: All the equipment, miners everything was left behind. There was deal done as I understand it.

Interviewer: Is it still down there? But isn't it worth a fortune?

BK: Not now. At the time it was.

I finished at Box Flat in 1983 and was transferred to Westfalen as Manager from 1983 to 1987, when it was closed. Westfalen had just reached the extremities of our boundary only months before this. We had tons of coal sitting in pillars and bottoms which we only commenced mining a few months before the mine closure.

BK: It was the old way of working. Get to the extremity and work your way back and take the pillars.

We had left big pillars and the purpose of leaving the pillars was to split and take the bottoms on the retreat, which was basically free coal. It wouldn't cost a cent in capital expenses because all the infrastructure was already there. Westfalen was very productive at the time but the end result was that we still got done and lost our jobs.

Interviewer: It is sealed full of coal and equipment.

BK: I get upset about that. They reckoned it wasn't worth bringing it out.

Interviewer: It was easy pickings isn't it?

It was but not now.

BK: You had to have a market for it.

Unfortunately the cost of production in Ipswich underground mines generally was high. After the power station commenced reduction in output, the mines had to look at exporting our surplus coal. We couldn't compete on a world market. For some reason New Hope seemed to be survivors. We, the rest of Ipswich mining community, used to always say "no hope for New Hope" but they were the lone survivors out of the entire Ipswich mining industry. The price of our coal was subsidised, in a fashion, while we were selling to the power station. Every time a consumer turned on a light switch and paid their electricity bill they were subsidising the price of the local coal, but this came to an end when attempting to sell on an export market.

Interviewer: The loss of the local market, Swanbank, was the thing that killed it?

BK: There were still other markets like Darra Cement but Swanbank was the prime market.

Westfalen supplied Darra Cement for many years up until its closure.

Interviewer: But that didn't compete in terms of quantities?

No that was only 300 ton a week which would not sustain a mechanised mine.

BK: That was only small. The answer to your question was two-fold. One was we had deliberately gone and pegged a lot of area so we had a heap of small open cuts to start off and we had gone up into Walloon and started Jeebropilly. So we had sources of open cut coal. We couldn't sell any of the Walloon coal to Swanbank. I remember when Tommy Marshall was working for the QEC (Qld Electricity Commission) and we said to him in the late 1970s can we bring some Walloon coal in from our leases at Purga and mix it in with our coal from Bundamba to feed into Swanbank? The price will come down. We were told that Walloon coal would never be burned in Swanbank power station. Guess where it comes from now? There were a couple of blokes there that really stuffed it for us.

Leaving the machinery and equipment underground at the time of closure was sacrilege, particularly at Westfalen. Box Flat would have been a more difficult job getting all the gear out of there due to the steepness of the entries but Westfalen would have been relatively simple. Beres Evans maintained that there was no market for second hand mining machinery and equipment at the time.

Interviewer: It went in there.

It went in there and it came out for major maintenance purposes. But Westfalen was easier because of the lesser grades making it much easier to drive the machinery out.

Interviewer: How did you get it into Box Flat?

It was more difficult. There was a rail system for man and supply transport. At Westfalen the men and supplies entered the mine by rubber tyred vehicles. At Box flat they entered initially by the rail system to the pit bottom where the men and supplies were then transferred to rubber tyres vehicles.

BK: No 9 was re-entered. After it had been abandoned there was a team that Greg Rowan was in charge of and they went down to try and find a way in. There is a million tons of coal in there that could have been taken. For whatever reason they didn't go far. They got to the bottom where it split off at the bottom of the rails.

That is a long way in.

BK: There was a big fall there so they didn't go in.

I was still the Manager at the stage where the rails ended which was prior to 1983. That point was out in front of the extremities of the old No 5 and 7 mine workings, in virgin territory. That was very deep there, I think about 1700 or 1800 feet which is extremely deep for board and pillar type workings. There was a large faulting system there. We went from the Lagoon seam using the fault to our advantage to enter into the upper seams. Our aim was always to get back up into the better quality coal which was the Bluff and Wright. At the end of the rails we turned at right angles, or to the dip, and drove two stone and one return air shaft

through the faulting system into the upper seams. We had just connected the three entries, conveyor, supply and return air on the top side of the stone drives, when I was asked to go to Westfalen as Manager. I was happy to do this change because Westfalen was remote from the Box Flat head office and at the time I was happy to get away from the head office politics.

After I left Box Flat a new technology with regards to machinery was introduced. At the time I thought this was a very brave move considering that it was world leading technology. They introduced a FCP which is flexible conveyor train. Instead of having shuttle cars running from the continuous miner back to the tail end of the belt, which would have been very long wheeling distances because of the large support pillars, this flexible conveyor train provided the link between the continuous miner and the rubberised conveyor belt. I think the record production shift produced approximately 1700-1800 tons, but I think that they had an awful lot of trouble in the early commissioning stage. It had never been tried anywhere in the world and had to be modified to suit our needs and board and pillar type workings. I think that the company through Beres Evans received a large federal government grant for the purpose of introduction of this new technology.

BK: That was the only piece of equipment salvaged from Box Flat No 9 because it was

leased to them, not owned. ACURL ran the trial. The equipment left behind was paid for by the insurance company.

I was unaware of that as I was at Westfalen. Westfalen was mainly a bunch of young guys who I didn't know and didn't grow up with. I started at Box Flat as an 18 year old and in some of the old miners eyes I was still probably an 18 year old boy when I left there to go to Westfalen in 1983. Consequently I was happy with my move, working with guys that knew of me but had never worked with me. It was a very enjoyable part of my mining career.

Interviewer: When did you become a Manager?

In 1971 I got my first mine – Box Flat no 8. I was 26 years old.

Interviewer: That would have been very young?

Yes at the time I believe it to be a record.

Interviewer: You had been a surveyor up till then?

No I got sick of surveying actually. I did my training and got my surveying certificate while working under a Scotch surveyor, John Simpson. It was difficult as there was only John as head surveyor and myself as the cadet and assistant. A lovely guy I might say but a difficult situation developed after my 3 years training, studying and gaining my

surveying certificate because I was still the young offsider or chainman. I rarely had the opportunity to practice what I had studied and learned and consequently lost interest in surveying. There was nowhere for me to go as John was a relatively young guy, only approximately 15 years older than myself and he was going to be at Box Flat for a long time. I didn't want to be a surveyor's assistant for the rest of my life but I was happy working at Box Flat. I consequently approached Tom Marshall and during our discussion requested a change of career from surveying to mining. I had an awful lot of regard for Tom as a manager and as a person.

Interviewer: Was he the Manager?

He was the General Manager. I had a lot of regard for Tom. He had a lot of charisma. In my eyes he could have been anything or anyone he could have been the President of the USA or a movie star. I went to Tom and told him I wasn't happy in the surveying field. After gaining my surveying certificate, I continued studying in the field of mining. My intentions were to being to obtain a first class Mine Manager's certificate and move away from surveying. Bob McQueen the owner of Box Flat together with Tom created a position for me as a technical assistant to the Manager. I was a gofer to a certain extent. I did the ventilation surveys a lot of mine planning which I really liked and assisted in various jobs around the Box Flat. I did my diploma

in mining and then obtained my first class mine manager's certificate. My diploma being the last issued by the education department as the mining education system changed from this point on.

Tape 3

BK: There was a story about John Simpson. He was the surveyor at Box Flat. There was a shortage of surveyors on the field so he used to do the surveying at Derek Cribb's Southern Cross No 3. One day John met his end and ran into a coal truck going out of New Hope.

Yes he was killed poor fellow. I must have moved on into the mining part of my career at this stage because I used to go with him as his assistant but wasn't with him on the day. We used to survey Southern Cross and Moreton Extended. John may have been doing other mines as well. At one stage after obtaining my surveyors certificate I was surveying New Hope on a part time basis by myself. He had a collision with a truck out of New Hope. I recall that his car wasn't badly damaged and by all accounts neither was he, but he didn't survive.

BK: It was about 4.45. He must have been looking into the sun and went in front of the truck. Nothing could be done.

Interviewer: Can we talk about the Box Flat explosion? Was there any warning, had things been building up?

The Bluff seam was a very fiery seam, prone to spontaneous heating, possibly the worst in Ipswich. The Aberdare seam was a similar fiery seam.

BK: Aberdare had been worked out but Bluff was the next one.

Management was always aware of the possibility of spontaneous heatings and were very cautious and vigilant. We used to work a board and pillar system of mining, similar to all of the other mechanised Ipswich mines. Production sections would be driven right and left from the development dips. These sections would consist of 4 or 5 roadways approximately 100 feet centres and cross connected with roadways at the same centres. These sections would be driven to the extremities of the lease or in some cases an arbitrary boundary formed by a fault or seam deterioration and on the retreat from these extremities second phase mining would take place such as splitting pillars and taking bottoms. This was the gravy. All the infrastructures and roof supports were already there. On completion of mining we would seal the entries to the sections off. These seals were inspected and checked on a weekly basis.

It was good mining practice considering the nature of the coal. Under the same token, Westfalen didn't have a seal in the mine not one brick wall or stopping. Totally different nature of coal.

BK: It would be difficult to see. It was too high.

It was generally good mining practice, otherwise the old workings would possible be ventilated with fresh air which then flows into the actual working faces. The main purpose of sealing off the old workings was to deprive them of oxygen and reduce the chance of spontaneous heatings. Alec Lawrie was very aware of all the hot spots. On a weekly basis he would personally inspect the hot spots. If he couldn't he would commission one of his under managers such as Coll King, Alwyn Grulke or Brian Rasmussen all very capable guys. They would police all of the potential hot spots.

The ventilation fans ran continually 24/7. They were never turned off. This particular weekend there was a planned interruption of power supply to the mine by SEQEB.

BK: It wasn't required at the time in Queensland to keep the fans running all the time.

Interviewer: You chose to?

Yes to keep the mine ventilated and cool. It was a very extensive and deep mine which is a contributing factor in heat generation. We used to keep the fans running to keep the place relatively cool over weekends. This particular weekend the power station were doing maintenance so the mine power supply was turned off.

Every Sunday afternoon Alec Lawrie, the manager of No 5 & 7, would check the ventilation fan to make sure that it was still running. I would do the same with the No 8 development mine fan. When he turned the fan on that particular day he detected a fire stink smell. He went and stood directly in front of where the fan was exhausting and he was suspicious that there was a problem. So he called one of his Under Managers, probably Brian Rasmussen who unfortunately didn't survive the following explosion later that night. I am of the belief that they went down the mine and found a small fire which they attempted to extinguish. It proved to be too big of a task for the two of them so they returned to the surface and I think that was when the mines inspector and rescue crew were contacted and brought in. Apparently by the time they got there, been briefed and proceeded down the mine the intensity of the fire had increased considerably and they couldn't fight it from the direction that they were coming from. It apparently developed into an inferno in a few short hours from when Alec and Brian first saw it as burning ambers.

They attempted to attack it from another direction but were chased out by smoke. The last attempt was down through No. 7 and up through the stone drives which inter-connected the two tunnels. They were also looking at sealing No 5 from No 7 at the stone drives so as to isolate the fire to the No 5 tunnel. That was when it all came

unstuck at approximately 2 o'clock on the Monday morning. The mine exploded while the rescue crew was underground. The rescue crew were men from various mines in the district including a number from Box Flat who were also part of the rescue brigade. There were a number of Box Flat personnel working on the surface in the preliminary stage of sealing the entry tunnels. They also were all killed. Seventeen men lost their lives whether they were working in the tunnel mouths on the surface, or underground.

When it was first detected it was apparently only smouldering ambers on the edge of a brick seal where the coal had fretted and fractured around the seal. The air passing through the fractured coal would have fed the heating which eventually turned into a raging inferno. It was suggested that the initial explosion was a gas explosion caused by air recirculation which instigated a more volatile coal dust explosion. There were 100s, possibly 1000s of tons of fine coal on the floor of the old and present workings. Throughout the mine there were coal floors which were broken and ground into fine powder by track mounted and rubber tyred vehicles. This is a resultant of mechanisation and the board and pillar system of mining.

Interviewer: So Alec Lawrie was down there on Sunday afternoon and the explosion was in the early hours of Monday so the whole thing took 12 hours?

Yes, he detected the problem at about 3 or 4 in the afternoon when the power was turned back on and he restarted the fans. From 3 o'clock until about 2 o'clock it was all over. It was a horrendous day.

Interviewer: The ramifications for the company were huge. Bob McQueen would never have fully recovered I would think?

I think he tended to divorce himself from it He retired to Bribie Island. He always had a house there. He spent less time at the mine and he designated the responsibility for running the mine to his John, who wasn't interested. He was more interested in big game hunting and fishing and breeding cattle. He had a much older brother who was a pilot in WWII. Apparently his brother used to buzz the McQueen house in his fighter plane. He was killed during the war. Bob only had two children. There had to be a 17 age difference. After the older son lost his life it was stated that John was totally spoilt by his parents. On his 17 birthday he was given a brand new Mercedes Benz sports. On his 21st birthday it was a Jaguar. He never really worked a day in his life. He had an electrician's ticket. When he was home in Ipswich he would breeze in at or just after the start of the working day and leave half an hour later.

Interviewer: How did Alec Lawrie cope?

He was devastated.

Interviewer: He sounds like the luckiest guy as he could have been there.

So could Reg Hardy. A lot of people could have been there. Reg Hardy was the Mines Inspector. He didn't come out of it well. I was good mates with Reg's son and consequently I spent a lot of time with Reg and I don't think he ever recovered from the explosion. Alec after a period appeared to be pretty resilient. While he appeared to have recovered he probably didn't. Initially he was absolutely devastated. There was a very lengthy mining inquiry into the explosion where both Alec and Reg as survivors of that night were required to give extensive evidence. Both the union and the company employed Barristers for the enquiry. It was serious stuff.

Interviewer: Did the company support them?

Oh yes. I don't know about Reg I must admit. He may have carried the bag himself as I suppose the Box Flat legal council couldn't support someone employed by the Mines Department. But I am not sure what support he got from the Department.

Interviewer: I have heard a little about the impact it had on the industry such as the stone dusting regulations.

BK: They existed before but they were never policed.

Interviewer: They did after that?

BK: You couldn't very well not.

Des Gittens who was employed by the Mines department was a full time dust sampler. It was very difficult and labour intensive to maintain the standards.

BK: They are not sure it makes any difference.

The introduction of monitoring equipment started at the same time. All that equipment is only as good as the person who is reading and analysing the information. Maintenance on the equipment and readers etc. also proved to be an ongoing task.

BK: I am not sure we are any more advanced now than then. People have it written in books today and have to look it up. It isn't the same as walking around and having the experience. They wouldn't know what they were smelling. In those days there were many more heatings that there are now today. They are just as serious but people aren't quite as prepared for it.

Interviewer: That was something you anticipated?

BK: We were all aware of what the change could be.

Moura was a volatile coal seam too. Kianga went up twice.

BK: Kianga went up once in 1975, Moura no 4 went up and Moura No 2 went up. I told you about my experience at Greta. We pulled pillars. Someone smelt smoke and we had to seal off 7 heatings and were worked the 16th to a party and we built stoppings. We started at

the beginning of the week and by Friday the smoke was pouring out. The end of the shift we built the stoppers and put the bungs in. You wouldn't do it now. We finished on the Friday night taking all the cars and equipment out. They started again on the Sunday night. They knew from experience they could do that.

There is a lot to be said about the old practical miner. I was in South Africa with Bill Kathage in 1983. We were down this mine where they were pulling pillars with a continuous miner. There was a Scottish shift boss, the rest of the crew being coloured. All of a sudden the miner driver threw the machine into reverse and started to pull back from the face. The Scottish shift boss stood his ground and told his men to "get back in here" and continue mining. He was trying to stop them from pulling out. But they heard something. Something happened that spooked them. I was inquisitive to find out who was going to win the argument and hesitated, standing in close proximity to the shift boss. The next minute, without further warning all hell broke loose and the roof caved in over the top of the miner. I tell you, the shift boss and I were lucky to come out of it alive.

Interviewer: It came down?

Yes it was a big one. They heard something. I didn't and neither did the shift boss and if he did he didn't recognise it as a serious problem. All

the crew around the face certainly knew that there was a danger.

Interviewer: Instinct?

Instinct and practical experience.

BK: The end result of that is we don't pull pillars with continuous miners anymore, effectively. Pulling pillars is difficult. Push the miner out as far as you can with no support, it has to come down.

I will give you a light subject. I guess there were a lot of characters as well as resourceful practical miners in the industry and they all disappear with time and age. Every industry has characters. Going back to the '64 era when we put the conveyor belt in to replace the alligator haulage system, Merv Wall, who was the pit bottomer, filling the alligators, was about to lose his job. He wrote the following poem about his predicament and his desires which I consider to be a classic. The poem was written with chalk on the steel plates of the underground bin. Over the years I have always remembered most of his poem:

Long years I have toiled on the pit bottom it's true
To raise the record to 172
But after Christmas I'll be doing less
When I work with Greasy Guess

*172 alligators was the
actual record at the time*

Harry Guess was the pit greaser

Or there again it may be super
Down the dip with Erric Cooper
Where four bob wet is paid each shift
And on my low wage that's quite a lift

Erric Cooper was section manager

Or in the north with my old cobber
Herb Gerulke's son by name of Dobber

Alwyn Grulke was section manager

If I really want to go far
Just leave it to my young friend Clar
For he will make his presence felt
And I will shovel along the belt

Clary Wolski was under manager

Or could I hope to hear great white father say
Give this underground work away
Helmet and light you need no more
Because I need you in my store

*Tom Marshall was the general manager
of Box Flat and had striking silver hair.
The storeman was coming up for retirement
and Merv was hoping he would get the job.*

Or an electrician I could be
No that job is not for me
For they are very seldom found
Unless there is overtime around

If I want to fritter time away
I'd be a fitter

To the surveyor I could give assistance
If I could understand him at a distance

*John Simpson was a Scotsman
with a very broad accent.*

There are some who say I orta
Go with Edgar to Blackwater

*Edgar Fowler was the engine driver
for the alligators haulage system*

So it seems I'll have to wait
To see what is to be my fate

Interviewer: Where did Merv Wall end up?

Strangely enough he got the storeman's job but only for a very short period of time. The storeman's job was under the colliery staff award. The job he was doing was under the miners union award. He was treasurer of the branch union and some of the funds went astray. When he resigned from the union he also had to resign from the treasury position. Either an audit of the union books or the incoming treasurer found a discrepancy which became general knowledge. The company then terminated Merv's position as they probably didn't want him in the store because of his past record.

I don't know where he finished up and strangely enough the new treasurer did the same thing.

BK: So you finished up in the pits when you finished at Westfalen?

June 1987. There was a team of guys and myself who worked on for 1-2 weeks after the majority of men at Westfalen and all the men at Box Flat were retrenched. We continued to supply the cement works, QCL. We only had one production crew working on a one shift basis for the short period before the company pulled the pin on us as well. The severance pays and accretions such as holidays sick pay long service leave etc. amounted to a lot of money for any long term employee. I often wonder if the

company, Beres Evans, because of these entitlements, wasn't doing us a favour when he terminated our employment after only 1-2 weeks extended life.

Going back to pulling the gear out of Westfalen. - we were working 6km from the surface so that is 12 kms of rubber conveyor belt which would have been easily recoverable in a very short period maybe only a week. I often thought that I would like to get a team of trusted guys and pull the guts out of the mine. I wouldn't touch the conveyor structure as it would be too time consuming, very rusted and probably not saleable.

The machinery, the rubber belt, the water pipes the conveyor drive heads and electrical equipment were all left behind and was relatively easily recoverable. I think it was wrong.

BK: I think it was wrong, but we don't know.