

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Depression Project

Coal Mining during the Depression

O. H. 421

WILLIAM VERDINEK

Interviewed

by

Dan Flood

on

February 7, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM VERDINEK

INTERVIEWER: Dan Flood

SUBJECT: Unions, Wages, Company Towns, Mining Accidents,  
Prohibition, Unemployment

DATE: February 7, 1976

F: This is an interview with Bill Verdinek for the Youngstown State University Depression Project, by Dan Flood, at Bill's home, 1935 Concord Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on February 7, 1976, at approximately 1:00 p.m.

Do you want to start off by giving us some of your background, where you were born, family members?

V: I was born in Pennsylvania on June 13, 1909, in a place called Sygan. It's a little town in a coal mining camp. I went to school at what they called Valley School. It had six grades. I have two brothers and three sisters.

F: How many kids were in school at the time?

V: Quite a few. I would say there were about thirty-five or forty in three grades and then again in the other three. We had several different teachers too. I didn't go to school there too long. I left school in 1921 and we went to Arkansas. From there we went to a place called Silver Ridges, Arkansas. There I went to school only two months in the year. It was in January and February. During the other time I was farming.

F: Was it required at that time that you had to go to school?

V: Yes, you had to go to school, but you weren't required to go any more than that because you had to farm. When I was there I was twelve years old. I only went to about fourth grade. From then I was fifteen and left after the two years. My dad went back to Pennsylvania and couldn't

get a job so he went to West Virginia. After he went there he got a job in August and he called me the following year. I became sixteen in June. In September I started in the coal mines. Coal was paying 66¢ for a ton. It was really tough in that time, and that was in 1925.

F: What was a typical day like in the coal mines? What time did you start?

V: We started at 7:00 in the morning and quit at 4:00. That was before it was really bad. The really bad part came in 1932, 1933, and 1934. I used to go to work at 2:00 in the morning and come out at maybe 5:00 in the evening. At that time then they were only paying 22¢ a ton for coal. I got a job then loading dirt for 50¢ a car. It was just side work because I wasn't working steady all of the time. They would give you extra work if you wanted to come out on a day that you weren't working.

From there I left that part of the coal mine in West Virginia.

F: Let's go back and get a couple of more details about that part of the coal mines. You were underneath the ground at that time?

V: Yes.

F: How far under?

V: We were in about 400 feet. I have worked deeper than that. I worked at 585 feet. That was a shaft man.

F: When you said 66¢ a ton that meant as far as chipping out the coal?

V: Yes.

F: Loading it too?

V: Yes. You had to get it loose, put it in a car, and get it outside before you got anything for it. That was paying 66¢ a ton when I first started. After while, when the real Depression came, in Hoover's administration, it dropped down to 22¢ and 18¢. That's the time it was really tough. It was really bad, but I was single then. The only thing you worked for was the company. You couldn't get more money out of it. Whatever you got was what you dealt out.

F: How long did it take you to chip away, load, and get it out? How many hours?

V: It didn't take too long. Per car it took about an hour and a half. You generally loaded four or five cars a day. Cars averaged around 3600 pounds, a little over a ton. At some other times you had what they called a pillar. You could put in three cars in a trip. Maybe sometime you loaded twelve or thirteen a day because you continued working; you didn't have to wait on cars. That's the time they made a little bit more money, but they still weren't making too much.

F: Was that a coal town that you lived in?

V: Yes, Kempton, West Virginia.

F: Who owned the town?

V: The town was owned by the Western Maryland Railroad Company. The company was the Davis Coal & Coke Company. The company was the one that built the houses, but the ground was leased from the Western Maryland Railroad to the company. Now the coal mine is ceased, but it still belongs to the Western Maryland Railroad. People bought the homes and they gave them a leases for ninety-nine years. You can't buy property, but it's yours while you're there. If you sell anything you're selling just the house with the property. After you've died it goes back to the company.

F: How were they to work for?

V: They were a good company to work for. It wasn't as bad as some places that I have worked. I worked for a place in Triadelphia, West Virginia too. They used to tell me how tough it was then. If you lived in your house and you had property in some other town, you had to pay rent for one of those homes whether you lived in them or not. I heard there were six people paying for the rent of one home and they didn't live there. You had to do that to hold a job. Our company where I worked wasn't that bad. Everybody had their own home.

I remember there was one fellow who was living away from where he worked in his own home. They told him that he would have to move in a company home or do the same thing. Rather than do that he moved in the company home and rented his house.

F: I heard that some of these coal companies used to charge enormous rents, and food prices to get back at the workers. Was this the case?

V: No. It wasn't real bad, but you didn't make anything.

When I got married it was 1938. I left West Virginia and went to Pennsylvania. It was a place called Burgettstown and I worked there. The rent included electric and it was \$16 a month. You had to buy coal because there was a coal burner. If you wanted to, you could go out and get your own coal.

The last place I worked was a slope. You walked from the outside in so far and then you would cut what they called a man trip. You rode that inside. That's where I finished up in the coal mines in 1951. It was a place called Triadelphia. That was for the Valley Camp Coal Company. They treated you good then. I think the wages were \$18 a day at that time; that was 1951. That was the place where six people were paying rent for one home.

I worked in a lot of places. I worked at a place they call Scotch Run in Morgantown, West Virginia. I worked in there and they called it Scotch Run. That was a bad place too. It wasn't a bad place to work, but you couldn't keep your tools in there. People would steal them.

F: You had to own your own tools?

V: You had to buy your own tools.

F: I thought you had company tools.

V: No. Now the company has tools because it's all automatic. Before you had to buy your shovel and pick; you had to buy a saw, axe, and a drill. All you do is leave home and go now. You even change your clothes down there. You wore your own clothes. The company furnishes the clothes now. They are all safety clothes: safety shoes, safety hats, stuff like that. Right now the coal mines are paying about \$65 a day. When I got married in 1938, I was averaging around \$3 a day. I never got over \$3 though. We worked in a gang of about twenty men. Whatever we made, everybody got the same amount. We were loading on what they called a loader at that time.

F: What were the ages you worked with?

V: They were old people. There were a lot of colored people that worked where I worked. They were around sixty or sixty-five.

F: What was the youngest?

V: The youngest was around eighteen or twenty-two. When I worked in Burgettstown I told the boss that I wanted

day work. This was when you went in you knew what you were making. They wouldn't give it to me. Another coal mine was further down called Slovan Coal Company. They had the loaders in already and they were paying day work, so I quit. He kept coming after me. He said, "You quit here, you're going to have to get out of the house." I couldn't get out of the house; I didn't have any place to go. There were no houses down there. I told him, "I can't." He said, "You'll have to do that or quit." I said, "No. I'm not going to quit down there. You give me day work. I like to work for you up here, but you have to give me day work." A lot of colored people worked in there and they wouldn't put out. This was all equal and I said I didn't want that. I said, "I'm a worker. I like to work. I want day work." He said, "I'll see what I can do." He came up with day work and I came back. I thanked him a lot too. I said, "I love this. I like to work, but damn if I'm going to work for somebody else." I worked in Burgettstown until 1941 when the Second World War broke out. Coal miners were exonerated; they didn't take them.

From there we went back to West Virginia. Then I came over here in 1951, November. I got a job here at Republic Steel. I ran a crane down at Center Street. I worked until 1952 and then I got laid off. From there I got a job at United Engineering, where I worked until my retirement.

F: Do you remember any of the coal mining accidents?

V: Yes, there were several accidents. I was in several of them. I got burned on my leg on one of them. When you rode the belt in they have cables wrapped around poles. There were three of us in the room. I was the leader, the machine man. This happened in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania.

F: By room you mean something dug into the side of . . .

V: Yes. You have spaces between each room, maybe fifty feet. As I was going up the other two men already went. I got up there and there was a lot of smoke up there. Nothing happened when I went by this place. I was sending in supplies. I was sending up timber and this smoke kept coming up. I could hardly see anymore so I ran into the place. I had about 150 feet to go up in there. I told those fellows, "Drop everything and come out of there! There is something wrong!" When I came out you couldn't see anymore; you just had to feel. You knew where you were though. I got out there and jumped on a belt and came out. As I passed where the cable was I saw it was on fire. Air comes up one way in the mine

and turns around and comes back the other way. It pushed the smoke right up into all those rooms. Whenever I came by they said, "Here they come." I said, "I'm here, but I don't know about the two." By golly, the other two came out too. I didn't think they were going to come out.

Then I had another close save. I have a mark from it. I left Burgettstown; my wife and I were going home. We had just gotten married. We were going to West Virginia from Pennsylvania. They came around the house and asked if we wanted to work that day. Naturally, whenever you got a chance to work you jumped at it. Whenever you worked on extra days you got day work. I went in there and we had to move machinery from place to place. This was in a high place where the rock fell in. It was just quitting time, we were ready to go home, and the boss told me, "That machine doesn't look very good there. I think we should move it a little bit." We had to set what they called jack pipe. You had to set it up against the roof with the machine cable. As I went to set the jack pipe up and start running the machine, put the controller on, the jack pipe came down and hit me and knocked me out. When I got outside I was already in the foreman's office when the doctor came up. They thought for sure I was dead. That was only two close calls that I had. I've had coal fall on me and sprain my back a little bit, but I was never really hurt. I know of people that have been killed though.

F: Were there any collapses of mines?

V: Nothing like that since I've been in the mines.

F: Are there a lot of fumes in the mines?

V: Yes. Dust explosion causes a lot too. Right now they have it pretty well controlled because they use rock dust. They work three shifts and every shift has to start putting rock dust down first.

F: Is this a type of pellet, like sand?

V: Yes, it's white. You have it in a sack and you throw it. It's like sowing oats.

F: As far as the mines themselves, do you think you've seen a lot of progress since the 1920's and 1930's?

V: Oh my, yes.

F: How is that?

- V: Before the company didn't care about you as much as they did anything else. With companies that had mules in the mines, they would worry about the mules more than they did you. They would hear timber cracking sometimes and they would say watch the mule. They didn't say anything about watch yourself.
- F: Were they using mules at the time you were in?
- V: Yes. In 1942 when I was working we came home and I told the boss, "This place is going to fall in tonight." They had two machines in there. He told us to go back in and get them out. I said, "No, I'm not going in there." The boss went in with us. I said, "If you want to go and see what's happening, you go in with us. I'll go in and try and help, but you get it out." He went in there. We got it out all right. If it had stayed all night, we wouldn't have gotten that machinery out; it would have been in there. They didn't care for that; all they wanted is coal out. They didn't give you a chance to try and timber it, to try to be on a safe to safe side. They were taking too much time to do that. Now in the coal mines it's different. They don't set timber. They have pin posts; they buroow a hole in the roof and set big bars or pieces that stick out that hold timbers up. For every room that a loader went in they had a timber crew. You would have to go in and set timber and crossbars. There had to be a post on each side and a bar across. For every section that you cut they gave you a seven foot space. You had to set about three bars to every seven feet.
- F: The one job that you were talking about when you were the chief of the room itself, you had to chip and then load it on. The mules are the ones that carried the carts out?
- V: Yes. The mules pulled the cart out, but you pushed the cart in yourself. That was all level work. As soon as a driver came in and got a cart and pulled it out with a mule you were right there with another cart and pushed it in. There were two of you in a room at that time. That was back in 1925. Then after a while they got rid of the mules and stuck with the motors.
- F: They had tracks though even with the mules?
- V: Yes. I worked in one mine too where they had a wood track. That was in 1926 or 1927. I put twenty-seven years in the coal mines. I started in 1925 and I quit in 1951.
- F: When did they begin to unionize?



V: It was unionized, but they started when Roosevelt became president in 1933. At that time when we tried to unionize you couldn't unionize on company property. They wouldn't let you do it. You had to get out on the state highway. Even the state highway cops would come around and try to push you off the road. We finally got organized, but there were still a lot of places that you couldn't get them organized, like down in Kentucky. Even now they're just starting to get their places organized.

F: Why did they have so much trouble in Kentucky?

V: They just didn't want any union down there. They had a bunch of 'scabs' there.

F: The people?

V: Yes. Now they're getting it in there and now it's hurting them. They're trying to get this pension and the black lungers go through and they can't get it. From my judgment they don't deserve it.

When I started at United Engineer they were paying low wages. They had an independent union when I started there. When I started there I was running a crane. They were running three turns: day, afternoon, and midnight. Every crane man was getting different rates. I couldn't see that. If you weren't polite you didn't get any merit raise. If you were radical, you were out. You had to be in with the boss for him to give it to you.

F: What was it like in the mines, the same type of setup as far as unions?

V: When you were on tonnage, the more you loaded the more you made. If you were a timberman, you got timber rate. If you were a machine operator, you got paid tonnage. Everybody got the same rate in each class in tonnage. In mines, the highest rate is electrician.

F: Let's go back to the 1930's when you started in the mines with the unions. What kinds of demands did you ask for?

V: There were no demands at that time. They were just giving you a start-off. In 1933 the first rate we got was \$4.35 day work. To load tonnage it jumped from 18¢ and 22¢ to 78¢.

F: I would like to know your ideas about certain men in the country who were running the country, like Roosevelt?

V: Roosevelt was a great man. That's the only president in my time of life that I knew was a good president. As far as unions, John L. Lewis was the one; we gave him a lot of credit.

F: Were you involved in any large strikes with the mine?

V: Yes. I would never cross a picket line. I've been in tough times, but . . . In the coal mines they used to strike every year. Every first of April came and you knew there was going to be a strike.

In our coal mine they used to try to get union men to become bosses. They had one in there who was a very good union man; he was president of the union. He went to school to become a foreman and he became radical. One day we went down in the mine and the first one threw his water out of the bucket and the others followed. We struck on account of the fellow. The company said they weren't going to get rid of him and we told them we were going to strike; they got rid of him.

F: Was there a lot of physical violence in a lot of these strikes?

V: Yes, there was. We went to places where we cut the shovel handles in two. There would be cars loaded with coal and we dumped them. They had other machinery down there we would break or demolish. Some mines had trucks to load their coal. We would wait until they came up and got out of company territory and then we would stop them and make them unload it. They would get mad and I would tell them that we were trying to organize and they were doing these tricks. I would say, "If you would quit for a couple of days maybe everything would straighten out. If you keep on doing this we're going to have trouble."

F: These fights, possibly between the people who were scabbing and the picket people themselves, did they ever turn into someone's death?

V: No. Nobody got killed or anything. Pretty well beat up sometimes, but nobody got hurt so bad as to be taken to the hospital. We never wanted to make any real bad violence.

F: Were you unemployed at all during the 1930's?

V: Yes. I was unemployed quite a while. It was really bad. If you were to load dirty coal they would give you a ten or fifteen day layoff. One poor guy got a thirty day layoff for loading dirty coal.

F: What do you mean by dirty coal?

- V: They have dirty coal that you have to throw out. Coal is mixed up with slate. The machine cuts out the center piece of slate, but in some places it leaves pieces on. When you shoot it it all crumbles. When it came outside on the picking table they had checkers picking the stuff out. If there was too much of it they put it on a pile. They would give you a two day layoff for having too much. At that time, too, it was really tough for companies to sell it. It had to be real clean. When you go in there, naturally a fellow can't see anything.
- F: How about people who were starving, or soup lines or something like this?
- V: People didn't have money to buy stuff even when they were working five days a week because they could only get so many cars. You couldn't go in and get all you wanted. Some people could load more if they could get it. What you made out of it is all there was.
- F: Do you remember some of your meals?
- V: It was mostly beans and potatoes. You couldn't get pork chops and stuff like that. Most of the people around there raised their own gardens and the company allowed you to raise chickens and pigs if you wanted. You had to have places away from the house.
- F: I was wondering if you ever heard any of Roosevelt's fireside chats?
- V: Yes. I remember him for the WPA. I got dirty coal one time and they fired me. The boss had warned me about it. I tried to hide it. I would put in clean coal and then throw in what I thought was good. He figured it wasn't any good. I came out and they had a big pile. At that time the WPA was on and the foreman was on the WPA. I got on that and worked a little bit.
- F: What did you do on the WPA?
- V: I worked on the road. I had to put bricks in for roads. In the meantime, the foreman that fired me died and they put another one on. I knew him really well and he said, "Do you want to go back to the coal mines?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I'll get you back in." I got back in, but I wasn't loading coal. I was braking on the motor. He said he would put me on day work so they couldn't get anything against me for loading coal any more. I did the braking and at the end I got to run the motor. I ended up as a motorman down here in Pennsylvania. I worked at a place called Triadelphia; it's close to Wheeling. I ended up there in 1951. I was working on the third turn.

They knocked the third turn off and they told me they didn't know when they were going to put me back on. I came from Triadelphia to Youngstown and got a job in the steel mills.

F: During the 1930's when a lot of people could not pay for the coal themselves, they used to steal it, right?

V: Yes. You could steal it and you could picket too. Some people used to put lime on top of it. If you burned it you knew it would mess up your stove. If you got caught you were fired. You had to be very careful. Coal wasn't very expensive, but you weren't making any money. They had a strip mine in Pennsylvania and I used to go out and pick a little coal, get a sackful now and then. They had a long run of cars at the company and on my way home, before I would get to the last one, I would look back; if nobody was looking I would climb up on a coal car and throw a lump off and go home. I got away with a lot of that kind of stuff. A lot of people would do that. The company got wise to that and they put that white stuff on it. If you were wise enough all you had to do was take it off.

F: There was one strike I remember reading about during the war, was it steel or coal? They said they would just stop working and sending over supplies. I think that was involved with the steel.

V: I think so. Coal mines at that time weren't hit at all. Like I say, the coal miner was exempted from going into the Army.

F: Was there any reason for them to be exempted?

V: Yes, they needed coal. They needed the coal miners because the ones in there were already experienced.

F: What did they need the coal for during wartime?

V: They had it for all steel mills?

F: For the steel mills themselves, for armaments?

V: Yes. That's the time they were really productive; they had to have it.

F: Did you people work in conjunction with the steel mills then quite a bit?

V: Yes. Some companies owned steel mill plants. The one that I worked for didn't.

- F: What type of entertainment did you have in the coal company?
- V: We had baseball and square dancing at the houses. They would go from house to house.
- F: Everything was economical?
- V: That's right.
- F: If there is anything that you have learned from the Depression, what would it be?
- V: It was to try to raise your children, to buy their clothing and put them through school. I didn't have too much trouble because I watched my money.
- F: There are a couple of news items that may bring back memories. The Lindbergh kidnapping, do you remember that?
- V: Yes, I remember that. I didn't take too much interest in that. I remember the trials, but not too much so that I could tell you anything.
- F: How about when prohibition was repealed?
- V: Where I was working they used to make their moonshine. A lot of times the policemen were in kahoots with the guys. The only ones who would bother you would be the state police. Up there they had a constable, and he would find out ahead of time that the place was going to be raided. He would come around and tell you.
- F: How about the Zeppelin explosion?
- V: I don't remember that at all?
- F: How about Orson Welles on radio?
- V: I know who Orson Welles is, but I can't remember what he mentioned on radio.
- F: Is there anything else that you remember about the Depression days or about Mr. Roosevelt or his wife?
- V: In 1933 when they started organizing the United Mine Workers I remember that Mrs. Roosevelt was the only wife of the presidents that came around the coal mines. She was interested in that and she went into the coal mines at a place called Carmichaels, Pennsylvania. Roosevelt was the only

president in my time that I know of that ever went to those little coal camps. The coal camp that I lived in in West Virginia was a small coal camp. He went through that in an open car. That has never happened before. Even now, a president has never gone to any of those little towns like that.

F: Thank you very much for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW