

SUBJECT: Oral History

CLASS: Wednesday 1 - 3pm

A taped interview and Essay on Arthur Goodwin,
a retired miner who spend well over fourty years in
the Mining Industry around the Rothbury - Braxton
area.

INTERVIEWER: Barb Ta.

Open Foundation student at Newcastle University 1987.

Arthur was the youngest of ten children born to John and Elizabeth Goodwin who lived around the Rothbury and Braunton area for most of their lives. Educated by the Sisters of Mercy at the local convent school, Arthur was known as a bit of a 'rebel' and took every opportunity to 'wag' to go off with his mates into the bush trapping birds and rabbits so they could sell them for a bit of pocket money. Although considered pretty bright at school, especially at maths, the rebel in Arthur and his great love for the bush soon took over so at the age of 14 he left school to find work and also hoped this would give him the freedom to pursue the bush life he loved so much. Before long a job came up at Rothbury Collieries, an industry his father and four of his brothers were involved in. So along with seven or eight other boys he started working as a Jigger boy. This was to be the beginning of well over 40 years in the mining industry for Arthur until his retirement in 1972.

It was in 1926 that Arthur started work, with most of his earnings going towards helping his mother with the housekeeping, keeping a little for himself to buy tobacco. This job as a Jigger boy continued until 1929, the year of the the great lockout and riot at Rothbury Collieries. An incident that will long be remembered by the miners and their families, and also the affect it had on the people of the district at that time.

The 1929 Lockout lasted 14 months the owners closing up their mine and giving notice to its workers, if they didn't accept a wage reduction of 12.5% on the contract rate, 1/- a day in the day rate, plus giving the owners the right to hire and fire, and an agreement to abolish pit stoppages and pit top meetings. They were given just fourteen days to decide. Arthur was only 17 at the time and remembers very vividly the day when thousands of miners converged on the village of Rothbury in the chilly hours of the morning. They came from all over the Cessnock and Northern Coalfields district, with most coming on foot although a few came

on bicycles, cars and trucks all choking the narrow dirt road that stretched between Cessnock and Branxton. 'Scabs' had been brought in from Sydney to keep the wheels turning and this angered the miners causing mass picketing. They camped on the road side opposite the colliery gates and lit fires to keep themselves warm from the cool breeze and waited. 1. (tape) Arthur recalls that morning "I was out there picketing one morning, talking to a bloke from Kurri by the name of Bains about different things when a ruckous started to happen near the gate into the mine. A press car pull^{ed} up with a camera and the men were turning the car over and using the camera as a game of football. Next thing the police came up out of the scrub like rabbits firing bullets ping! ping! ping! .Paint flying off the fences. I said to this bloke from Kurri the paint is flying off these fences I think we better go around the corner; Bains said yes I think we had better; it was just after that a bloke by the name of Norman Brown got shot just 20 yards from us. 2. "At Rothbury on the 16th December 1929 there took place the first death in Australia through armed clash between police and trade unionists. Symbolically it was an accidental death; evoking undertones of farce jostling with tragedy. A young miner of twenty eight, Norman Brown was playing cards well clear of a developing confrontation between pickets and police, a ricochet bullet passed through his body, finally lodging in his shirt. He died two hours later in Maitland Hospital." Arthur also remembers another fellow by the name of Woods getting wounded. 3. Wally Woods was 21 and a day when he was shot in the throat by a policeman at North Rothbury on 16th December 1929. Now 77 and living at Raymond Terrace he is the last survivor of the miners who were wounded by gunshot at the riot. 4. Mr woods recalled "I'd leaned down to pick up a rock and something just picked me up and put me in the middle of the road flat on me back." When they re-opened the mine Arthur only worked for one week. The mine at that time had new owners R.W. Miller & Sons who changed the name to Ayrfield No 3, so named because of the steep shafts it contained. ^{new paragraph} It was at this time Arthur had a break from mining. He went working for his sister and brother inlaw on a dairy farm at

1. Arthur Goodwin, Interview Tape, 1987.
2. Robert Oksey, ed., The Great Depression in Australia, Rothbury - Miriam Dixon, 1970.
3. Norm Barney, Staff writer, Newcastle Morning Herald, 19th May, 1985.
4. Ibid.,

Eldeslie, often working from dawn till dusk for a pound a week and his keep. His big highlight of the week was a ride into town on horseback with the boys to take in a movie at the local picture show. It was here that he met up with an old school mate who had lived opposite him in Branxton, but was now only visiting her grandmother. Her family had moved up north ^{to a place} called Attunga a little village a few miles out of Tamworth. It was over twelve months before Arthur saw Rita again. It was when he went visiting Rita's parents for a holiday and the time of the depression. Determined not to take the dole Arthur decided to stay on and try to get a job hoping that things were not quite so bad up country. He took odd jobs here and there and eventually got lucky when Rita's father was able to secure a job in the Lime Quarry where he himself worked. Work was very hard in the quarry, so when he was offered a job on a couple of properties around Attunga trapping and clearing rabbits of their land he snapped it up, working back in the bush where he loved to be. The payment was that he could sell both the meat and the skins of the rabbits. It was during this period, 1935 that he married Rita and they lived in the a big house on the side of the mountain close to the properties where he was working and making his living off *from* rabbit trapping. Arthur remembers the hard times of the depression when rabbits used to sell for 5 pence a pair, but as he said there was always food on the table even though sometimes it was only bread and 'junket'. He believes like many that if it wasn't for the rabbits most people would have had great difficulty surviving the depression. As time went on the rabbit supplies inevitably got thin, so in 1937 Arthur tried to register on a job at the Sandy Hollow line. After six weeks of trying he eventually gave up. His brother Jim was at that time ^{working} at Ayrfield and suggested he try for a job down there so he rode down with his brother to have a go. His persistence paid off when he recommenced at Ayrfield on an award rate as a wheeler. His next move was to bring down his wife Rita and their twelve month old daughter Margaret to live at Rothbury so they could be close to him and his work. He eventually served his time as a wheeler and was moved into the mine itself.

There were a number of strikes while Arthur worked at Ayrfield; the first being in 1938 when they striked over lamps. The miners were asked to buy and supply their own lamps and when they refused they were out for 14 weeks, but returned to work when the owners supplied them with lamps. But this work only lasted another six weeks before they were told that there was no more work. Work used to depend on the mine being able to obtain a contract. So they had to wait for the newspaper to come out to see if their company got the contract they had tendered for and if it was not successful they had no work. It was then suggested that maybe they should apply for the government dole in this instance. But Arthur one for speaking his mind said, no way it was the dole that brought him back to work here in the first place so he wasn't going to start taking it now. So things went on for a further 18 months. During the 1938 strike Arthur kept his family in food doing a bit of fencing and killing rabbits. They even suggested that he give back some of what he was making for support to others, something that didn't go down well with him. Another strike was ordered in 1940, but the men refused to go out this time, after getting kicked in the guts last time they didn't budge.

In 1947 Ayrfield was registered with the federation in Sydney and got their own union. They were the first mine to recieve the Bonus which meant that they were paid by an over all production, both men on top and men below ground something Arthur though was a little unfair as he maintains that men below used to do^{all} the hard yaka. If you were prepared to work you could earn good money and you always got a shift. 3. men producing 40 tons with a scraper load were paid 1/- per ton, per man, per day on top of wages, and after the initial 40 tons they were paid 1/4 per ton. You worked with two other men and a horse. Arthur used to shoot the coal, with one man putting up the timber supports and the third man loaded the skipp with the coal, then the horse had to

cart the coal out into the existing tunnel. Arthur maintains conditions were good; the ventilation was plentiful and water was continually sprayed around to settle any dust. They used to work a mile under straight^{down} and the same straight along either way, the reason why it was named Ayrfield

By this time Arthur had moved into Braxton as his family had grown to five daughters and schooling was closer there. Braxton was three or four miles from Rothbury so he used to ride his ^{push} bike to work every day taking a short-cut through the bush to cut down the journey. This was to be his transport to work until his retirement in 1972.

The last strike that Arthur said he was ever involved in was in 1949 and it lasted for 10 weeks. 5. (tape) "All we got out of that one was a heap of vegetables for our trouble" he said expressing his own personal views about it. Even though he was in the federation there were times when he did not always agree with some of the things that were proposed and of course he always told them so. I asked him had he seen many changes in the industry and maybe the district. He started off on a pick and shovel and finished up on electric borers and of course the pit horses were also phased out and as for the district he had not seen anything dramatical. He did say that no matter what, R.W. Miller always had a good name in the coal industry and never failed to sell his coal. Arthur remembers when Miller used to cart coal in bags on his trucks down to Morpeth then put them on the Sixty Miler Barges for transport to Sydney. But he also remembers when other companies used to try and use Miller's good name to sell their coal. So it was in 1975-1977 that no more coal was taken out of Ayrfield even though he knows and believes that there is plenty more down there still to get, but with like a lot of things the experienced deep mine workers are getting old, and the ones coming on lack their experience. Ayrfield is used today as a coal washery for other mines in the area with some of the men

~~one~~ still working ^{there} who were with Arthur before he retired.

So with the best part of 40 years in the mining industry with all its ups and downs Arthur retired on a flat rate of \$68 and recieved \$2200 long service leave. At his retirement dinner, the manager of R.W. Miller Mr Austin Greener praised his long employment and safety record in the mining industry and considered him one of the best and most knowledgable miners he had ever come in contact with in his job as a manager. Always a survivor and never afraid of hard work Arthur is now enjoying retirement with his wife Rita. They still live in Brantxton but have moved out of their rented house where a lot of hard times and happy memories took place. They built a new home up the other end of the street and moved into it in 1970 just a couple of weeks before their last daughter was married. Now 75 Arthur still has memories of those hard times. He maintains the bonus he recieved through his hard work and determination was what kept his family together and helped with his daughters' education and would do it all over again if he had to. His love of the bush is still in his blood. Every day without fail he goes for a good hours walk, bush, taking notice of the rabbits running here and there only now he just lets them be.

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