

INTERVIEW

Joe, after the Rothbury incident the lock out finished in May 1930 and you restarted in the mine then, how much longer after that did you continue working there?

Until I was twenty one. I was laid off at twenty one because that was the policy of the company then that as the junior became twenty one, he becomes an adult they couldn't afford to pay the wages so they laid you off.

So were there any miners in there over the age of twenty one?

Any miners, plenty of miners over the age of twenty one.

Well, you said they laid them off at twenty one.

Well all juniors over that age when they become men which was at twenty one and get adult wages they laid them off.

Right. So they were all under twenty one then, were they, all the men working in the mine?

No, no, no. All the old hands that had been working there for twenty odd years they retained them see.

Right

If they were doing junior jobs they wanted to keep them doing junior labour.

The junior jobs, right I see and what were the junior jobs, what did you do as a junior?

Well, what they call trapping, that's to divert the flow of air. Overdraught, winchdriving, screwdowns, chopping. A lot of junior jobs.

Where they more dangerous then the others would you say, or?

Oh, no, no, less dangerous.

Less dangerous. What were the rates of pay like?

The rates of pay were very good, I got six bob a day. When I started work they just forget the rate after that when I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen up to twenty one, but I think it went up to, for twenty one, I think it went up seventeen and eightpence a day.

No it went, after you were cutting down at twenty one that's was when you had to go on the dole.

Yes, went on the dole and despite the fact that my brother wasn't working and my father wasn't working, there was no income coming into the family, I wasn't allowed to live at home. They gave me a blanket, the Government was kind enough to give me a blanket, and I had to sleep down the park.

In fact, one day there two inspectors came from the department and they said to Mum, "Joseph George Cummings", and she said "Yes", and they said is that your son and she said "Yes", and they said "Where does he sleep", and she said "As a matter of fact that is his bed there". I had two pieces of timber through two corn bags sitting on butter boxes and that was my bed, couldn't afford anything else, and they said "Where is he now", she said "Down the back working in the garden", they said call him up, so they called me up, took me in the lounge room and read the Riot Act to me. "Do you know that we gave you a blanket and you're not allowed to live at home. You are supposed to be living/sleeping down the park". Anyrate, as they were talking to me they looked around the wall and Grandfather's Certificates were on the wall. He was in one of the top Lodges and they said "Oh, Tabias Cummings, is he your father?" and it was really my grandfather but I knew what they was after so I said "Oh yes, that's dad" they said do you want a job at the Police Force, how about that?"

Laughter.

This is true, this is true.

Did he take you up?

Will you stand up there, he said, stand up, he said "Yes, you'd be the right height, good, real good physique," he said "just the thing we want in the Police Force. I think you'd be the boy, you know, for the Police Force."

I didn't take any ...

It didn't take you long to realise.

No. I said, I told them I couldn't do what you fellows are doing, going around catching jokers sleeping at home instead of sleeping down the park in old rain, hail or shine.

And what was the purpose of pushing you not to live at home. If the idea was to force you to seek work on the irrigation area and seasonal ...

Yes, well there was no work anywhere. You'd get around the farmers and that see, the farmers and you'd know you might reach him about 6.00 at night just before dark in the summertime and he'd know what you want, you'd want a bed, see so you'd ask him for a job and he'd say "Righto I'll get you up in the morning, and we'll start work in the morning, wake you up about 4.00 o'clock, get the cows in to be milked, do other work and you'll work up till about 8.00 o'clock at night and you'd get nothing other than a bed and breakfast. That's all you got out of it but you were saving that from your dole, see, you were saving something.

And, eventually most of the young chaps from the mining community, the Steelworks was under a great expansion then in Newcastle and work was gradually being found, you know, for a lot of these chaps, and did you eventually, how come that you became employed in the Steel Industry?

Well actually, I was studying Electrical Engineering, but I found it very difficult to go ahead with it because you couldn't get books, expensive and that, and you had no money and I drove up to Mt Isa Mines, they were just opening up and I told them what my interests were in Electrical Engineering and they said, well come up here we might be able to put you in a job of a suitable type. So my only way of getting up to Queensland to Mt Isa was by jumping a rattler or walking.

Jumping a rattler, what's that?

Train, It's a train.

I haven't even heard of it before.

Well, they have the canvas over the goods trucks and that and you find a loose ends and you lift it up and jump inside of it see, protect yourself from the weather. But, I had a sore foot or something, I had just been operated on for Appendicitis and I had a tube in my side draining, so I thought I would try down the Steelworks and see if I could get a job there and get enough money to go up to Mt Isa. So, the first day I was down there Jack Gillard said to me "Alright you, you," there were about 400 of outside the gate waiting looking for work. Oh, first of all he said "Any returned soldiers here?". It was a joke with the returned soldiers because it was by a Government Policy that all manufacturers and that had to employ returned soldiers, so he called the returned soldiers in that door and out that door, just walked straight through and then he came out and said "You, you, you, and you come in", and I was one of the ones he called in.

But how long was that after? How did you get down from the coal mine?

Pushed the bike from the mine.

What time would you have to get up?

About 4.00 o'clock.

And how long did this go on for before you were eventually employed?

Oh, I think I got a job the first day. I started, got a job the first day on starting a steel boundary - demolishing a seam valve. We broke the seam it was white hot. We used to put wet corn bags around us to stop the heat from getting at us. I worked there 2 days and was laid off again. Actually I was going to head for Queensland then and I thought, well I'll try the Steelworks again. After pushing the bike down for weeks and weeks and weeks I got another job, a slag crusher. Forking slag, you could hardly pick the fork up let alone picking a forkful loaded up with slag and then I got a permanent job at the Bloomworld. I worked there for 42 years. Worked there for 42 years, 35 with Supervisors and you know what I got for Superannuation?

What was that?

\$7,600 for 42 years.

I had thought that you'd travelled down there daily in all sorts of weather for, actually for probably 12 or 18 months or longer, because I can remember our elder brother Jack he travelled down for long periods before he was eventually employed and also Ron.

Yes, well, I was fortunate Ray, I got a job with Jack Miller in the electrical game see and I used to work for them when I was coming down the Steelworks I'd work with them. He used to pay me 27 shillings a week I think it was for a week's work. Off and on it could have been low 12 months looking for work.

When you were starting the Electrical Business did you have to travel to Maitland or Kurri?

Cessnock.

Cessnock.

How did you get there?

I used to push a bike to Cessnock or walk, sometimes jump the rattler. That was three nights a week at Cessnock studying Electrical Engineering, two nights a week I went to Kurri Tech studying Bookkeeping. I thought well I've miss out on a lot in life particularly with education so I might as well take it on again. Unfortunately I couldn't go to high school in my day because I had three jobs when I was ten years old. On the milk run 4.00 o'clock of a morning, and I would take the papers around then I would get the mail run, to and Pelaw Main. For the mail job, morning and night for seven days a week, I think I got two and six a week for that. On the milk run I got one and six a week. On the paper run I got what ever commission you got selling papers, tuppence a dozen I think it was, if you sold a dozen papers in the morning you got tuppence.

Can I ask one more question about the beginning of the lock out? Do you think that the miners thought that it was going to last for so long, or do you think that?

No, I don't think that they did, but unfortunately they based it on the Northern District. See down the South Coast and that, Bulli and Wollongong and them places they didn't oppose the 12½% reduction on them and they were producing coal, see, and they were filling our contracts.

Which mine did you actually work in?

Richmond Main Collery.

Richmond Main Collery.

It is about three miles out from Pelaw Main where we were living.

Can you tell me a bit about what it was like down there.

Well, it's breathtaking first going down the caves, usually if they know there are any new starters starting they let the cage go down faster than normal, and you put your hand up the ceiling because the cage is going faster than what your body is going and you think you are going to hit the roof. Then when he starts to get to the bottom and shifts the weight you can feel the weight of your feet hitting the bottom of the cage.

How old were you when you first went down.

Fourteen.

Fourteen.

Was that average age for the young ones starting.

Yes, yes.

Did you have friends starting the same age.

Most of the lads started at fourteen or fifteen. I think I might have been accepted younger because I made application to work there when I was thirteen years old. I left school when I was thirteen years old in fact. I started there in, I think it was August, the eighth month, the 25th of the eighth in 1928.

That was when you first started.

Yes.

What were you being paid then, can you remember?

Six shillings a day.

Not much.

No, not much. It was a job.

That's right. Did you have other brothers working down there with you?

Yes, Jack was working down there, the eldest borther and my father was working there. Always a rush home to see who had the bath tub first. There was no modern bath tubs in those days all we had was round galvanised tub. You take your shirt and singlet off and knee down the floor and wash the top part of your body and then dry that and then take your trousers off and sit in the tub and do the bottom half.

.....

The company didn't provide bath tubs.

No it wasn't until 28 that they brought the act in that they had to provide baths for the men. Half hourish (?) and Richmond Main had a very modern one.

Richmond Main was quite a modern colliery/mine compared to the others, was it at that time?

Yes, they just started modernizing it in 1929 when the lock out came on. In fact John Brown came out there one morning before we started work and he said to me and Barry Hook, Barry was one of the forwards of the Kurri Rugby League Club, mate of mine and he said "Alright boys turn that skip over I want to address the men". He got up on the skip, we helped him up on the top of the skip and he started to give a run down on the stone drive that the section of the mine I was working. He said "It has got to be the most modern mine in the southern hemisphere, we are going to put all modern equipment in there". He said "The new shaft is almost completed", and he said "Whats more there will be enough coal down there to last up the colliary 72 years. But unfortunately it was mined out in no time. They put all modern coal cutters and everything and mined it out within six, seven years.

Did that happen while John Brown was there?

No John Brown died just after that. I don't think he lived to see the starting up of it.

Did you witness any bad accidents down there in the mine?

Yes, I saw several. I saw one joker, Mr Hunter from Stanford Merthyr. He was squashed in the head and he was still alive, in fact he was still conscious. Well, the top of his scalp was taken off and his brain was exposed and he was still conscious. Seen many a pit horse killed, unfortunately. Poor old Banjo, Banjo was the name of one of the horses, a beautiful horse, he broke his leg and the hostler that's the man in charge of the stable he had to come down and hit him over the head with a hammer. Harden miners they cried to see Banjo killed.

So they were kind to them weren't they? A lot of them went without seeing daylight, is that so?

Well, they used to bring them out once a week. Weekend they bring them out, but Pit horses in them days they didn't have reins on them. They used to give signals. Say G and that was turn to the right, come here, turn to the left.

And they obeyed every order?

Woo, back up, and he was the biggest safeguard the miners have, the old horse, when he would take the empties in, the horse would start to prance around and soon the as the there they had a pin going in from the on the skip and as soon as he heard that click he'd dart off and the miners say "Come on let's get out of this, the horse knows something".

Really

They get out and they might only go back about ten yard and the roof would come in.

The horse would know

Instinct.

Yes. Did they get fed well the horses?

Yes, they didin fact my brother was in charge of the stable there for a while. Jack, he was in charge of the stables. They were well looked after, the stables were kept real clean. They were lime washed once a week.

Water. Did they have water to drink anytime they wanted?

Yes, but not while they were working.

Were the stables in the mine or upstairs?

In the mine, down below.

Did they provide them with water, did you know?

Water and feed, Yes. But they didn't provide them with water while they were working. Sometimes the horse would collapse and they just put him in a until he would come through.

So he might have to go a whole day without a drink?

Yes, not twenty four hours. In fact one of my horses, I used to take an extra water bottle. When we were having crib he would be standing beside me, and he would look down to the water bottle and I would give him the knod and he would walk up there and put his lips around the cork and lift his head, pull the cork out and put his mouth around the top of the water bottle and lift it up in the air and drink the water. Educated.

Laughter.

So how many days a week did the mine operate?

Depending. Sometimes two, sometimes three, sometimes one. Lot of strikes in them days, miners fighting the conditions. The miners would go out one day and the Wheelers would go out the next day and the Pit top man would go out the next day. Battling for conditions all the time. I think in the early days they didn't have enough compensation. I think it was just after I started there the compensation came in. I can recall some of the men being laid off 1929, they didn't know where they were going to get their next meal from so they would put their finger up and the skip would take the top of their finger off and get twenty five pounds for it. For joy.

Did you remember the guy at lockout, were you working then in the mines when

I was working at the mines, in fact the my lockout notice.

How old were you then when the lockout began?

Fifteen.

Fifteen, so were you out of work for a whole year or how ever long it was? How long was it?

Fifteen months.

You were out of work for that long?

Yes.

Was that the only work in your area that you could of..?

The mines, yes. We were on the dole because we wasn't on strike we were locked out, you see. A lot of people think the miners strike, 18 months strike, wasn't a strike it was a lockout. The company locked us out to give us a 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ % reduction.

The men didn't want that reduction?

No, no.

This is what the Rothbury Riot stemmed from was it?

Yes, they bought the scabs in. They had a meeting one night at the Royal Theatre at Kurri and they decided to march on Rothbury. So a lot of the business people decided to offer their trucks, buses and "what have you", in fact I rode in the Sanitary Cart. A Utility, it was brand-new though, never ever been used for pans or anything like that. Teddy Brown just along from us, he drove it. I sat on the back, I think there was about twenty of us in the utility. About half past eleven that night, I think it was about half past eleven wasn't it Ray, you would remember that more than I did because you mentioned it to me one day. Think it was about half past eleven.

When you left for Rothbury?

Yes.

Oh yes, and actually I probably had been in bed for an hour or two then, but I actually had the idea that it was earlier in the morning like two o'clock or three o'clock in the morning, but I could have been wrong because I could have been in bed for a while because I was so young.

Where you

Yes.

I think it was about half past eleven, but it after we got down as far as Greta. The big medium-strip in the middle, there got the trees and that there we're all camped there, there was about fifteen thousand of us. I'm not sure, it tells you in them articles anyway, how many there was and we lit bomfires, we sang songs and had the pipe band there and the brass, I think we had three pipe bands.

That was the main street of what town?

Greta. Then just on daybreak the next morning we marched to Branxton, turned left there at the hotel and marched up to Rothbury.

Did your mining colleagues go with you, did all the people from Pelaw Main go?

Yes, nearly everybody was there because if you didn't go your relief docket cut out. More or less compository. One of our mining leaders said that "Juniors wasn't allowed to go", but we were of the opinion that if we didn't go well they stop our relief.

So can you remember the actual riot?

Yes, I can vividly remember us walking down the fence, and some of the jokers started to get through the fence walking towards the room, I was with them. Jack Bradley was in front of us, he said "Don't go up there lad, there got the boilers all steamed up and they are going to blow the steam on you". Just then the police charged and the mounted police came down. Jack Bradley was about three yards beside of me, close to the fence and a mounted trooper came down between me and Jack Bradley swing his trudgen and hit Jack Bradley over the head. Knocked his hat off, he had an old felt hat on. Hit him over the head. Blood streamed down his face. I made a quick bee line for the fence myself then, and got out. Then the firing started, and when they got to the other side of the fence they stopped and we were throwing stones at the police, then the police started to fire.

Can you remember Norman Brown being killed?

No. I can remember one fellow being shot, I thought it might have been Wood but reading back over the stories and that it couldn't have been him but one joker was shot in the neck, and I was in a little cabin down the side of the hill and I broke the door down, there was nobody in there, and I broke the door down and we got him in there and one of the fellows said "We'll have to get a doctor". I think we heard on the bush radio that Dr Bloomfield was coming to treat one of the fellows up in the pit paddock so me and another couple of jokers went up to intercept this doctor, which we did do, and a few of the fellows put their knives into his... He asked the Doc would he come down and have a look at our man see, and Dr Bloomfield said "No its my duty to tend the chappie up in the pit paddock first, so one of the fellows said "well if you don't come down we are going to puncture your car" so they stuck a knife in his tyre. Any rate he decided to see this fellow, so the jokers changed his tyre for him, just then the telegraph photographer was there and he took a photo of us and one joker said "Now give us that print mate" and he said "No, No" then he said "Give us your camera" and he said "No this is an expensive camera". They took it off him and threw it up in the air and it hit the ground and smashed to pieces. I had parts of that camera for years and threw them away not so long ago. But, they decided to let Dr Bloomfield go and he went up to the pit paddock and then they tell me he came back and tended our fellow then. Other than that, love I can't recall much of it. I can remember some of the hardened tough miners, they decided to go back to Kurri Military Depot to the Drill hall and break in and get the rifles out and bring them back. Do a little bit of war with the police.

Did they do that?

Somebody told them all the bolts were taken out of the rifles so they didn't go back.

Was that because the Police were worried before hand that they might have done that? Why were the bolts taken out?

Well, apparently, as you say they were frightened and they probably got word back to the Drill Hall to get the bolts out of the rifles. That was just a bit after me 21st birthday wasn't it, Wally?

Well, it must have been because they combed you out when you were 21.

Yes, that would be right 1914-1935 - 21.

9 August 1935. Yeah

Uncle Joe, do you remember the day that you received that letter saying that you had 14 days left to work and then it was the strike that lasted 15 months?

Yes, I do remember

Did everyone get it on the same day?

Yes, we all received that together.

And you got it fourteen days before was it?

Yes.

How did everyone feel?

Well in those days a job was a job, not like today, people don't care if they, in fact some kids today, they want to be out of work, they don't want work. In those days you travelled anywhere. I went on the track there for quiet a while and just satisfied to get a bed and breakfast.

Who told you this Ray

I just know it Joe because the same years that Mammerfield lived in Wallsend was the same years that Pop was a boy in Wallsend.

Yes

That's where his Mum and Dad lived

That's right

Your Dad, my great grandfather worked in the Richmond Mine as well?

Yes, he got smashed up in Richmond Mine

Right so what happened then, did he have compensation

Well he didn't get it then he didn't get it for a long, long time because as long as they could keep his leg on and his leg wasn't any good to him was it

No

As long as they could keep his leg on

No, there were steel pins in his leg to hold it together, in fact the doctor wanted to take it off and I said to the doctor, I said how about giving me a go Doctor and he said "what are you going to do" I said " you know the little battery set" I said "I'm going to stimulate it with electricity and massage it". He looked at me and said "well we can try" and within six weeks his leg was pink, it was black before that when they were going to take it off, it was pink, I used to massage it about three times a day and stimulate it with this battery, you could see his toes would be jumping you know, with the electricity charge going into it and that did the trick.

Now Joe when Pop went, not so much as when Mammerfield was there, because Mammerfield was one of those chaps that, in fact he antagonised him, because he got all the bosses from the colliery, can you remember the chap he had that was a good stinger and he conducted the choir at Kurr but you said he had one of the most foul mouths, and you were going to gang him. What was his name?

Kifford

I can always remember that because he was a nice looking chap with a moustache and chubby face. Short in stature, but he was a good singer.

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW

For my regional history paper, I chose to interview my Great Uncle Joseph George Cummings - born 2nd July, 1914. As my essay focuses on the Northern Collieries fifteen month lockout and the Rothbury Riots - in which Uncle Joe participated - I have tried to deal mainly with these incidents and the following depression years, in my interview.

Included in the interview is my Grandfather Raymond Charles Cummings who remembers vividly, his struggle during the Great Depression. Between them, I feel, they have given me some insight into their experiences as children and young men.

Uncle Joe began work at Richmond Main Colliery near Kurri Kurri when he was fourteen years old. He had not worked a year when the Lockout began. He was fifteen when he went to Rothbury.

In the beginning of the tape I have to establish the atmosphere within the mines in those days. In so doing, I asked Uncle Joe certain questions about his experiences as a young miner at Richmond Main.

He discusses the pit ponies and their role in the mines of yester year. He expresses the fact that the ponies were

He gives an account of an horrific accident at Richmond Main, of which he was a witness. Mine accidents were much more common then than they are now.

Uncle Joe talks about his experiences during the Lockout. He recalls the day he received the letter, along with his work mates, stating that they had only nine days of work left.

We spoke about the Rothbury incident and the lead up to the riots. He expresses the prevailing fear felt by the men before Rothbury, suggesting that many of them attended the intended picket because they were scared they would lose their relief payments if they didn't.

He also spoke about the meeting at which the decision was made to go to Rothbury.

Uncle Joe recalls his march to Rothbury, along with other men from his town, Pelaw Main and neighbouring towns. He talks of the night before the battle, when thousands of men, including himself, camped in the main street of Greta. He then recalls the last stretch of their journey to Rothbury, in the early morning of December 16, 1929.

Uncle Joe then discusses his memories of the riots and how he was close to Jack Baddley, Member for Cessnock and former Federation President, when he was clubbed over the head by a policeman whilst asking the miners to cool down and stop fighting. The policeman apparently used a baton on Jack Baddley.

He remembers the miners retreating when matters were getting out of hand he discusses his memories of the police firing at the miners as they did so. He also recalls some of the tougher miners going to look for guns of their own. Apparently there were some rifles in a drill hall close by but when the men got there they found that the bolts had been removed from the rifles.

Uncle Joe remembers a fellow standing close by him, being shot in the neck. He recalls his role in this particular incident. He discusses a photographer taking photos of the happenings and a fellow taking hold of the camera, throwing it in the air and letting it break as it hit the ground. I found out later that Uncle Joe still had the pieces of that camera until recently.

We then spoke about Uncle Joes survival during the Lockout. He remembers the family living in a boat shed at Cockle Creek for certain months of the year, and he recalls these times in detail.

My grandfather and Joe then talk about their father at great length. He was a miner too, until his leg was squashed in a mining accident.

They talk about the accident and my great grandfathers subsequent disability.

Ray proceeds to talk about the church and the role it played for the people during the depression years. He talks at length about his discoveries in his study of the Cummings family history. Ray and Joe then discuss a link between "Baron" John Brown (Richmond Main Collier) and our family.

From there onwards, we talk mainly of Uncle Joe's experiences during the Great Depression, and his pursuit for work after being layed off at the mine when he turned twenty one. It was not feasible for the collier to keep all the men on after they had turned twenty one because they were due for a pay rise.