

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE :

LESTER MILLER

INTERVIEWER :

TONY MILLER.

SUBJECT OF
INTERVIEW :

DATE :

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OPEN FOUNDATION
MILLER, LESTER.

SIDE 2. MONO.

HISTORY

OF THE

SULPHIDE CORPORATION

COCKLE CREEK N.S.W.

Day 1 Time?

The Sulphide Corporation at Cockle Creek was the first major industry to be established in the Newcastle district. It was established primarily for the treatment of Broken Hill sulphide ores using the Ashcroft Electrolytic Process. The Company was registered in London on the 29th October 1895 as the Sulphide Corporation (Ashcroft Process). The company purchased the central Mine of the Broken Hill Central Silver Mining Company in 1895 to ensure a constant supply of ore to the Cockle Creek works for the production of zinc.

Cockle Creek which was first occupied in 1829 by way of a grant was chosen as the site for the works for number of reasons. It was inexpensive leasehold land, it was adjacent to the main Northern railway line; there were abundant reserves of coal and coke; Cockle Creek provided salt cooling water, and labour was available; the choice of Cockle Creek as a site for the works was a great boon to the area which was trying to recover from the most disastrous flood ever recorded in the Hunter River in 1893. At the same time the economy was faltering due to bank crashes and financial disasters.

Plant was sent out from England and construction began in 1896. The works began operations on the 7th April 1897; and was shut down on the 28th July 1897; the closure was due to the failure of the electrolytic process which failed to make the process cyclic as well as failing to remove toxic impurities in the electrolyte. Despite considerable efforts to make this new method of zinc extraction a commercial success, it was decided to convert the works to an orthodox lead smelter to treat crude^{ores} and concentrates from the central Mine and from mines in other parts of the Commonwealth.

In 1898 the Corporation re-registered as the Sulphide Corporation Limited and this company structure continued until 1948 when the company's shares were purchased by the Broken Hill Corporation Limited a member of several companies in a group that became Consolidated Zinc Corporation Limited in 1949. A new proprietary company was registered in New South Wales in January 1950 and this was known as the Sulphide Corporation Pty Ltd.

Zinc was produced by distillation from 1902 till 1908. Then sintering machines were introduced and zinc was produced by these machines. The sulphuric acid and superphosphate plant was commissioned in 1913 and a full scale lead refinery was brought into operation in 1917. In 1922 due to low metal prices the smelting at Cockle Creek became uneconomic and the smelting section of the works was closed. The superphosphate and Mixed Fertilizer sections were expanded in 1923. The Sulphide Corporation manufactured superphosphate for 56 years from 1913 till 1969, when its subsidiary Greenleaf Fertilizers Limited was sold to Australian Fertilizers Limited. Greenleaf established the first manufacturing plant on Kooragang Island which is located at the mouth of the Hunter River.

Cement was also manufactured at the Sulphide plant at Cockle Creek between 1925 and 1956 and this cement was mainly used in the Newcastle District. The materials used in this production of cement came from various parts of Australia. Limestone was obtained from the Slucor deposit near Attunga just north of the city of Tamworth, lime shells from the Hunter River, Clay from the Sulphides' own clay pits which were situated east of the works, sand from the local beaches, slag from the blast furnace at Newcastle's B.H.P. Iron cinders from pyrites roasting and Gypsum from South Australia also from Western New South Wales. The coal used for firing the kilns was obtained from the Fassifern Colliery now known as the Newstan Colliery and in later years coal was mined from the Sulphides' own mine which was situated on the northern side of the cement plant. This mine was worked from 1949 till 1955 when it was closed. In the 31 years that the cement plant was operating 1,250,000 tons of cement was produced.

The Zinc and Lead smelter was constructed in the 1959-1961 period and it was commissioned in August, 1951. At that time it consisted of 3 major plants, a 250 tons per day sulphuric acid plant an up draught sinter plant for the roasting of Broken Hill zinc and lead concentrates and the Imperial Smelting Process for the reduction of sinter to zinc metal and lead bullion. The bullion that was produced contained 526,928 tons of Lead, 39,420261 ozs of silver and 957,564 ozs of Gold.

The Sulphuric Corporation's principle smelter products in the 1980's are zinc metals and alloys, lead bullion, cadmium metal, copper sulphate and sulphuric acid. The output is sold in Australia and in many countries throughout the world. Zinc is used in many ways, from the manufacture of steel roofs to refrigerators and nails because of its anti corrosion properties. It is also used in the manufacturing of brass products as well as rubber tyres, and many thousands of people apply it to their bodies for protection from the sun whilst at the beach. Cadmium is a by product of zinc production and is used in the manufacture of nickel-cadmium batteries which are rechargeable and also as a coating for corrosion protection on steel.

The lead which is produced is sold to lead refineries for the manufacturing of lead-acid batteries, pipes and chemicals. Sulphuric acid is used in the production of superphosphate fertilizers and also for the pickling of products in the steel industry. Copper Sulphate is used as a trace element in agricultural fertilizers and as a fungicide and also in the manufacture of wood preservatives, treated pine logs is an example.

In the 1980's the Sulphide Corporation is one of four companies owned by Pasminco Metals which is owned by Pasminco Limited. Pasminco stands for Pacific Smelting and Mining Company which is jointly owned by North Broken Hill and Consolidated Refinery Association each having a 50% share in Pasminco Limited. The Sulphide is one part of this giant conglomerate of industry.

Summary

Lester Miller.

Lester Miller was born on the 17th of February 1930 he was the first of two sons to Mary and Les Miller. Lesters' first years of his childhood were spent living in Dibb Street Adamstown. When he was 5 his family moved to 64 Wood Street Adamstown. Lesters' mother was a seamstress by trade and she worked at t this untill Lester was 10 years old. His father was employed as a Fitter and Turner with the New South Wales Government Railways and he worked at the Cardiff Workshops.

Lester attended the Catholic Primary School at Adamstown. When he was in Fifth class he became an altar boy and would often accompany the Parish priest from Adamstown to Charlestown, Dudley and then Redhead to serve on the altar during Mass on Sunday. Leaving home at 7am and not returning until 12.30pm. His interests at this time was going to the pictures on Saturday afternoon with his brother Ron. The admission price being 6d. After finishing his primary education Lester went to Marist Brothers High School at Hamilton until he had completed third form. Whilst at High School Lester became interested in athletics and running in particular being his forte. The sports master at the school coached Lester personally. His efforts were soon rewarded when Lester became the school champion. Lester represented Marist Brothers in many running events against other Catholic colleges throughout New South Wales.

At the age of 15 Lester joined the Myer Park athletic club which was located in Parkway Avenue. This training included riding his pushbike from Adamstown to Bar Beach and back under the supervision of his father Lester left the club at 19 after being the club champion and winning many trophies.

In 1945 at the age of 15 Lester commenced work as an office boy with the Sulphide Corporation at Cockle Creek. A weekly rail ticket from Adamstown to Cockle Creek cost Lester 7/-. In 1947 the family moved to Boolaroo where his parents had purchased a corner shop. Lester's father left the Railway workshop because of an eye injury. It was at this time that Lester met his future wife, Marion Wheeler who was the daughter of the local Post Master, Frank Wheeler.

In 1948 his parents bought the Rhondda Hotel and Lester would help his parents working behind the bar on weekends. When Lester was 18 he purchased a block of land at Argenton for £100 which was considered cheap at the time. In 1952 he married Marion and they moved into their new home in 1953.

Lester and Marion joined the Catholic younger set and enjoyed many inter parish picnics and dances. Lester like his father became a very talented gardener and although he was reluctant to enter garden competitions his gardens were always being admired by the neighbours. He was also involved with his five children in their various sporting activities.

Lester retired from the Sulphide Corporation in March 1987 after serving the company for 42 years and 9 months. Lester is on record at the Sulphide as the longest serving employee.

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

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Signed L. Miller

Date 12. 8. 88.

Interviewer L. Miller

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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Transcript of taped interview

for research of the Sulphide Corporation

At

Cockle Creek

The interviewer is Tony Miller and the interviewee is Lester Miller who tells of his working career at the Sulphide Corporation.

A career which spanned 42 years which is a record at the Sulphide Works.

T.M. : Lester, how old were you when you started work at the Sulphide ?

L.M. : 15 years of age.

T.M. : Why did you decide to go and work at the Sulphide?

L.M. : Because it was advertised in the office paper and years ago my grandfather worked there.

T.M. : Your grandfather worked at the Sulphide. What did he do?

L.M. : He was in the (pause) where they used to do the barrier roasting (pause) to get the gold and silver out of metals.

T.M. : What about your father did he work there?

L.M. : No he worked at Cardiff Loco, as a tool maker (pause) he was originally employed as a fitter and turner but later on he went as a tool maker.

T.M. : And.

L.M. : Then he was also the secretary of the A.E.U. in Newcastle.

T.M. : And you didn't have any urges to follow in his footsteps with the railway?

L.M. : No. That type of trade didn't interest me. I wanted clerical (pause).

T.M. : And um, you started there at 15. What position did you apply for?

L.M. : I started there as office boy, which entailed going down to the Boolaroo Post Office three times a day and collecting the mail from the mail box.

T.M. : And what other duties did you have to do?

L.M. : And at 11 o'clock run because the girls weren't allowed to go up on to the canteen, we had to collect their lunches.

T.M. : Right, now why couldn't girls - office staff go up to the canteen?

L.M. : Because no female was allowed on the works because the canteen was in the middle of the plant, and the acid fumes would affect their clothing their nylon clothing.

T.M. : When did you get promoted? How long were you an office boy?

L.M. : Fifteen months.

T.M. : And you went on to what?

L.M. : Stores - clerical.

T.M. : Did you have to sit for an exam to get into that position or did you just naturally move into it.

L.M. : No, I was just asked if I would like to go there.

T.M. : And what did you do there?

L.M. : That entailed booking up in the ledgers all of the stock which arrived at the plant, so that we knew what stock we had in each section. Then also booking out the stock (pause) the quantities that they used during the day.

T.M. : And how long were you in that position?

L.M. : Fifteen months.

T.M. : Again

L.M. : Yes.

T.M. : What did you go onto then?

L.M. : Then I went onto time keeping, this entailed booking up all the time against the different job numbers plus all the overtime working out the pays, working out the deductions doing all the tax, later on going into the pay window.

T.M. : And what year was this?

L.M. : About 1948.

T.M. : 1948 so you started work in 1945.

L.M. : Yes.

T.M. : Was there many office workers there? And also plant workers. How big was the Sulphide?

L.M. : (pause) In those days there would be about thirty in the office (pause) and about 300 and (pause) 320 on the plant. Now this stage there's about 250 in the office and 1100 on the plant.

T.M. : So it has certainly grown over the years. What were the Sulphide like to work for? Were they did you have bosses looking over your shoulder all the time? What was it like?

L.M. : No the bosses didn't worry you as long as you did your days work. You would never see them from one week until another, although you knew that they were ^{there} but if you didn't give them a fair deal you soon got told. You weren't given any chances either you were just virtually told to go.

T.M. : ~~Right, while you were at the Sulphide at this time.~~

- T.M. : Right, while you were at the Sulphide at this time were you involved in any social activities? Be it through the Sulphide or ah other areas?
- L.M. : Only their Christmas Tree.
- T.M. : The Sulphide has a Christmas tree.
- L.M. : Only the Christmas Tree and the picnics, but later on they started what's known as the staff social which when it came time for your 25 year long service leave they, they have a big dinner and all the staff were invited this included the plant too the men up on the plant (pause) but when I started in the Sulphide they were mainly interested only in cement which they got the limestone from the the Attunga quarry near Tamworth and the shell grit from the Hunter River at Fullerton Cove and this was crushed over there and came out by trucks, they were also interested in fertilizer which the phosphate rock used to come by boat from Christmas Island, Nauru, and Ocean Island, then it was transported from the wharf out to the Sulphide by lorries owned by G.H. Hawkins, They also made acid which they sold to various firms around here like L'saghts (pause) Bellbrooks (pause) and used great quantities of the acid in the production of superphosphate (long pause). Later on they discovered that they would be better going into metals.
- T.M. : Why did they want to go into metals?
- L.M. : Because of the world demand for metals and the Sulphide was situated in a place where it was close to the wharf and also rail and they had their own rail siding up here at Sulphide Junction (pause) so in the meantime they had already purchased land at Koorangang Island on which they built a Superphosphate plant and Acid Plant over there, so they decided they would get rid of the fertilizer which was sold to Australian Fertilizers, but they still have fertilizer on site at Cockle Creek and their trucks come in there and get loads of bulk super for different places throughout the country. (long pause).
- T.M. : And was there any strikes up there in the office area?
- L.M. : No there was no stikes in the office area.
- T.M. : Any go slows or?
- L.M. : No

T.M. : What about up on the plant? I'm sure there would be plenty of strikes up there.

L.M. : Yes.

T.M. : How long can you remember the longest one being?

L.M. : The longest one went for a month.

T.M. : And what was that over?

L.M. : Just over wages the company wouldn't accept their log of claims and the blokes just went on strike (pause) so the company got together they worked out a log of claims themselves and presented it to the men. The men rejected some and accepted some and then they made out their log of claims and the company accepted some and rejected some.

T.M. : Likewise.

L.M. : In the meantime while there was a stike that went on for any length of period the furnaces mainly down in the refinery couldn't be shut down because it would cost thousands to start them back up again.

T.M. : Thousands of dollars?

L.M. : Dollars. So different staff foremen would go down and man them because they knew what they were doing and to get the rest of the staff for keeping the plant tidy clean.

T.M. : So these were all office workers?

L.M. : Office staff were, were put up there. Firstly they started mainly with the blokes on the personel on the metalurgical side of it, then they went to the drawing office, then finally they came down to the clerks.

T.M. : Were they forced to do it? Or were they asked to do it?

L.M. : They were asked to do it.

T.M. : And you could refuse.

L.M. : You could refuse, (pause) mainly if you had anything wrong with you. You could refuse it. I was asked but I couldn't do it because I'd just recently had a big cerebal hemorage operation. Therefore I was kept down in the office (pause) but I had a different job every day, I'd be in stores clerical, I'd be in accounts just to keep the place going.

T.M. : Alright how did you go any further from there?

L.M. : Then I went into the (pause) costing department because I was familiar with the time office and I had a good idea what of all the job numbers. I was asked to cost these, wages, these wages detailed in collecting all the job numbers under their own numbers, keeping the running total of the hours then we used to cost them at the end of the month which the time office would give us certain amount of dollars and we would have to allocate our hours with that. The pay sheets that we used were 36inches long by 18inches in depth and this was a bit awkward to handle so I started to draw up some sheets redesigning these sheets and I made kept on photostating them till I got it down to a foolscap size.

T.M. : So you redesigned your own time sheets.

L.M. : Not my time sheets, the pay sheets.

T.M. : The pay sheets.

L.M. : Worksheets.

T.M. : Did you get into trouble for this? Was you allowed to do it?

L.M. : I was allowed to do it if it helped me in my work and helped the company.

T.M. : And whay did the bosses think of this"?

L.M. : The bosses thought it was alright in fact we had an internal auditor (pause) group of auditors up from Melbourne which they do every so often and one of the auditorssaw these sheets and asked who designed them? I told him I did he asked me to run off him 12 copies and they took back to Melbourne office and got run off and put them all in the other different parts of their group.

T.M. : So they were pleased with them.

L.M. : They were very pleased with them.

T.M. : And did you get a special mention, a pat on the back?

L.M. : I got a rise out of it.

T.M. : You got a pay rise out of it.

L.M. : Yeah. (long pause) Now these days the Sulphide Corporation is only interested in concentrating on acid and metals.

T.M. : After this costing department what did you do then?

L.M. : I went back to the accounts payable mainly because my job went on computer and the computer just naturally did everything. So I was asked if I would go back to the accounts payable and this entailed matching up all the invoices that the G.R.N.s would. The G.R.N.s are sheets of goods received and then working out seeing that all the prices work out with the same on the order form, then putting all details on a front slip. Like the job number, the price, the amount of money and the job number.

T.M. : All this working was Monday to Friday 8 hrs a day wasn't it?

L.M. : Monday to Friday when I originally started there we used to work every Saturday morning. $\frac{1}{2}$ to 8 till 11 O'clock. Then about 12 months later it got one Saturday in every three then it became one in every two then we had a skeleton staff which was one Saturday in every 4 until finally they found out it was a waste of time.

T.M. : So they cut it out altogether.

L.M. : Cut it out altogether.

T.M. : What were the wages like?

L.M. : When I started I got 30/- a week.

T.M. : Aweek.

L.M. : Of course if I had to if I paid any tax I had to get tax taken out of that. I used to travel out by train.

T.M. : How much was it and from where?

L.M. : From Adamstown to Cockle Creek.

T.M. : How much was your train fare?

L.M. : 7/- for a weekly ticket.

T.M. : Did you ever have a car?

L.M. : No I never had a car. Later on when I bought a block of ground at Argenton I used to walk to work and sometimes if I was walking to work and it started to rain a Mr McDougal who use to work out at Newstan, who later on ..

T.M. : Mr McDougal he was the Lord Mayor.

L.M. : Later on he was the Lord Mayor of Newcastle. He used to pick me up and give me a lift.

T.M. : How, how did you get to know him?

L.M. : Just by walking to work an it started to rain one morning and he happened to go by and he just stopped and picked me up and it just kept on that way, that he used to just look out for me each morning. (pause).

T.M. : And is there anything eventful that happened at the Sulphide?

L.M. : Yes they were robbed,.

T.M. : They were robbed

L.M. : Payroll was robbed.

T.M. : Were you involved with that?

L.M. : I was supposed to go up on the pay that day,. I was, we had different rosters and I was rostered on the pay that afternoon but I had a lot of work to do a lot of time sheets to get through and I got permission to go off it and another boy went up on it and they just pulled up in a car with their masks and their guns and just rammed the door down, they had the watchman on the ground and took his gun away from him and just walked in and just picked up the pay tins and walked out with them, later on.

T.M. : It must have looked suspicious, what with you asking not to be on there and then being robbed.

L.M. : Yes. They got in touch straight away with the detectives. I didn't get home until 7o'clock that night.

T.M. : Instead of half past four.

L.M. : Mainly, yes instead half past instead of half past four mainly because we had to turn around and do a another complete pay run because we had no details no envelopes, no nothing all of us had to work that night. Then we had to ring up first thing in the morning or overnight they rang up to the bank and got them to give us another lot of money, but the next morning the the detectives were out there and several of us got questioned, because I asked to get off the pay that day., I spent about 2½hrs with the detectives wanting to know why I wanted to get off the pays that particular day. Did they

T.M. : Did they eventually catch them?

L.M. : Yes they caught them.

T.M. : Ah thats good news, and it worked out you weren't involved.

L.M. : No I wasn't involved. They got a jail sentence I didn't have to go to court.

T.M. : ~~Did they ever find the stolen money?~~

L.M. : ~~Yes they found some of the money in a house in Argenton~~

- T.M. : Did they ever find the stolen money?
- L.M. : Yes they found some of the money in a house in Argenton stuffed behind the television, but another case that we had on the pay (pause) was this bloke came down and got the pay and if, if you had numbers say from 1 to 250 you had to come on one side of the window from 251 to the end you came on the other side of the window. This man came through on the 1 to 250 side and got this particular pay then it was noticed in the afternoon later on at half past three when they got paid he got this other pay earlier because he was working back he came for it on his ordinary time and I noticed him getting another pay.
- T.M. : Did you query him?
- L.M. : No we paid it because he had his own pay slip and he showed us his licence that we we did query that but when the bloke came through on the 150 side to get his pay there was no pay and seeing I'd already served him this man was man was working back this night and I was sent up to the super shed and I had to walk around the area he was in there, and this made him a little bit juttery and he went to his foreman and confessed that he already pinched another apy because he was short of money himself.
- T.M. : What happened then? Did he get the sack?
- L.M. : He got the sack straight away.
- T.M. : And you retired in 1987 March 87.
- L.M. : Retired on the 6th of March 1987.
- T.M. : After.
- L.M. : 42 years and 9 months.,
- T.M. : Was that any type of record?
- L.M. : At the time I retired I was the longest serving member of the Sulphide.
- T.M. : Ah thats very good. So now you just enjoy your leisure time . Thank you very much Lester for that interview.