

JOHN PIEROVICH

Reference: Argonaut Mine disaster---crewman

James Clayton, remember him, he and I were good friends. Begovich, Yankovich---I remember a lot of these Slavs. But Ben Sanguinetti, that's who I went to see. The first morning I heard about this I went and saw Ben. Says Ben I better go help out in the crews. I got on the 3 to 11 crew. Work about six hours, about four crews see. Work right through and of course the gas and everything in that Argonaut---no body could go down there. They had these government men, they had masks and they went down there. Anyhow they had these gas masks and they could go down there...We went to work in the Kennedy on the 36th (level). The level hadn't been worked for years, but that was almost the level where they thought them fellers were and we drifted in in an old drift. That's a tunnel, an old drift, see? We drifted in there and we worked three weeks. And most of this drift was through slate, you know what this Mother Lode slate is? One part is greenstone the other is slate. There's a slip during an upheaval and this drift was in this slate originally which is easy to go through. But during the years they didn't work this slate squeezes, but the big-heads thought they could go in there pretty fast. But it slowed us up, I remember working in there in conditions about this high (?) and there was an old track down below. We run into an old car that we had to bang open, it was all rusty, and we went right over it. That is, we got it out. And we kept working. They had a wheel barrow crew. They brought a bunch of wheel barrows in there and the only way we could work

cause there was no track was like that. It was really short conditions, and you see maybe one guy would bring his wheel barrow down to me from like clear across the street. Then we dug in the sides here to stand the barrow straight up. Just like we dug an impression in the side of the wall. You put your wheelbarrow straight up so the guy could come and you could pick his up and then he'd take yours back. And we worked in those conditions for almost twenty one days---that what it took us to get in there.

There was a cross cut and we'd fill that up full of muck. A CROSS cut is---am I giving you what you want? Is that all right? (Yes, it is.)

You see, the 36th in the Kennedy was a straight shaft. They figured this drift (tunnel) would hit the Argonaut pretty close to where these people should be. And this was the conditions we worked in--- this was slate, and over here, maybe, a couple of hundred feet from where we thought we'd go up there was a big opening in the greenstone---they call it a cross cut. We filled that up with a lot of dirt, as far as we could go and put the muck anyplace we could that would get it out fast. But this muck here we took over to the 36th station, when this station comes down into the Kennedy it's a big open station like that. And the skip or the ~~xxx~~ cage or whatever you want to call it stops there and you get out and there's a lot of room there, an air compressor in there, so we finally got over here after 18 or 20 days and Mr. Downs, can you remember Mr. Downs? No, that's before your time. He was the County

Surveyor. He come in there and he told us---I'll never forget I happened to be there---I was just a little guy on the crew, don't think I was a big shot there---he says you gotta go up on a 45 here for, I forget, so many feet here and you should hit the 42 in the Argonaut, which we did. Anyway, we broke through on the 42 right on the bottom of this drift. You see, the shaft was over here and this drift from the Argonaut come this way---and I'll never forget I was sitting on the ~~xxxx~~ station when the last shot was going in and I happened to---that crew and I was scared up to here, you know I didn't know which way that smoke would go. When the carbon monoxide, is that what they call it, but they had it figured out, this Muldoon shaft, going up the grade this side of the Argonaut about maybe a thousand feet down the road was the Muldoon shaft and it was the air shaft for the Argonaut. It connected into a lot of levels and it had a blower there and the blowers were sucking the air out. AND they figured that the air when it hit through and they busted this last round in the Argonaut---I tell you, I happened to be sitting on the 36th station and, God Damn, I don't know which way this stuff is coming up---~~xxx~~ there's no way you can go, ya know. But it didn't---and I can remember that just like looking at you---and when that shot went out there that air just rushed through there; and then I walked and went over there towards the end there were rocks this big going straight up that 45 from the draft that was created. Rocks that hit your face and everything. So, as we called them, the canary men went in there. They were good guys, they knew what they were doing. They carried a little cage with a canary in it.

That poor little canary would keel over and they knew it was getting awful strong. So, we went in there and there was a fella on our crew by the name of Smith. He was a husky guy and they kind of put him in charge of the first crew that went down there. They picked five of them. I begged like hell to go down with them, I said, I wanta go with you. I don't know what the hell was the matter with me, I was a young punk, ya know. And, by God, he let me go. So I was one of the first five down to the 46 where these people were. But I didn't go in there where they were because there was a big bulkhead there and those canary men went in there because I think there was still some gas and it was kinda in the drift, see. It was in one of these crosscuts and off center on the drift. So, after they figured it was alright and everything they got help, I helped to take five of the first people out of there. I didn't see any of them because they had them all wrapped up and they had a big gauze mask on---and formaldehyde, it smelled awful, that was on them. And they took them from the 46th and installed what they called a ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ tigger (?), a tigger is a little air compressor with a gun on it, and it's about that big (?) but they used them a lot in the mines to move timbers and things. And they had maybe a 3/8 line and they installed that on the 42 up here, and they put a line down to the 46th. They strapped them poor guys on this kind of chicken wire stretcher, and they had them all wrapped up and strapped on. They found them all in there, all of them dead. In this cross cut over here they tell me that as soon as those poor fellows keeled over I guess they just took them and put them in
one corner

over here, in a pile. So, the first five I helped take out, and taking them out through that drift that we drifted, you had to cramp to go in there you know. You'd have to walk a little way and then hold them, and just two guys could do it. So we got the first five out to the 36th in the Kennedy---then we put them on the skip and went up. And after that they got five of us to go to Los Angeles. Went down there to raise money. You'd think we were big heroes down there. The line was three blocks long to get in and see us monkeys---Andy, he gave a speech and this Roy Skelley, he gave a little sketch and we got more invitations for dinner and stuff. The main purpose of this was to raise money for the orphans and families, and we did raise quite a bit of money.

I remember after this we were in Grauman's Theater, and we had a matinee and two shows at night. God, that show business get boring. We had these old clothes on, these are the original clothes; I still have my lamp, but I haven't got my hat.

We all went down there, and I remember going out to Vernon to the prize fight. And they announced that miners from the Argonaut disaster would be there and that any donations would be welcome.

Then we went up in the ring---and I never seen so much money thrown in that ring. I had to pick up these silver dollars in my hat and a lot of greenbacks too. One guy was carrying a sack and just stuffing it away. I don't know how much money we got, I think around \$20,000. That was a lot of money in them days.

And we had a donation box in front of the theater too.

After that, well I wasn't here during the funeral, I was in Los Angeles. Now, I don't know what kind of interview you want?

(This is perfect, just what I wanted to hear.)

I had to big picture of the crew. This poor fellow had a brother in there and I know he went up in the front where they had a lot of digging going through this slate. The slate was kinda soft but still firm and two of them would be up there digging by hand and a couple of them mucking. And this poor fella, his brother was in there and when it come time to quit he didn't want to and I said, "Come on, there's other people to do it." I'll never forget him, he wasn't a regular miner but he wanted to get in there to his brother.

We worked from three till about nine or ten I guess it was. And they had four shifts on there; they never stopped working. Took three weeks to get in there. Well, I knew after ten days that they couldn't last.

Do you want anything else? Do you want these pictures?

(Sure.)

Why don't you take this book.

Here's a picture of old Fessel. He wrote this on the wall, see, "Three o'clock, gas getting strong." And the poor fella thought he'd get away and he went way up, I forget what level, I think the 48th, and the poor fella passed out up there I guess, and they found him one year later. This was when they flooded the mine to kill all the fire and then drained it out again---and that's when they found him. They found him way up in a stope (?).

(What was the origin of the fire?)

I think it was faulty---this is just hearsay/~~you~~ know---I think it was faulty electricity going down that shaft. Because, I'll tell you, the Argonaut ^{shaft} on an incline was dry almost to the bottom.

There was a lot of dry timber there, now it could be that a short circuit started. That's what they figured.

Oh, I tell ya. These people were on the levels from 42 to 46. The 46th was down where most of them were working. But the 42 was where we came in.

(This was in 1922?)

Yah.

(Was the 46 the bottom of the mine?)

No, no, no. I don't think so. 5000 I think it was. I think that the Argonaut Mine followed this ~~XXXXXXXX~~ vein on an incline, it followed all this ore, and when it got down here they lost it and they come maybe this way.

What else do you want to know?

(Can you tell me anything about these men on these lists?)

These fellows from the Argonaut didn't come around to much. They stayed hidden. ARE these some of the people who come over to help?

(Yes, this is a list of the rescue people.)

Well, I can tell you something about my crew. The people on this list didn't work on the ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ rescue crew. You see, this was on a Sunday, and a lot of the regular guys didn't go to work. That's why there were only about 46, otherwise there would have been a hundred of them.

Of course, Fessel. There were all kinds of stories that he set the fire.

That really went, that thing (skip?). When you'd stop at that station the give in that cable would bounce it a lot. You couldn't get off that thing right away, you just had to wait till it settled down and stopped.

It was 21 days I worked in there, and I lost about 20 pounds. From stooping over and pushing those wheel barrows my back was all raw. And there wasn't much air in there. When you get in those deep mines if you haven't got any compressed air it get hot real quick.

I remember there was a little air pipe when we first started in there that they connected up. It was pretty close to the station and I used to get under it to cool off.

(You had to use wheel barrows because this was an unused drift?)
That's right. There were no rails or cars or nothing in there. To get in there as fast as they could they dug with picks. I doubt that if they had shot in this slate, ya know if you put powder in something that isn't too hard it just makes a hole--- it doesn't break. Also, you'd have to contend with that powder smoke and everything.

When we was going up on this 45 Mr. Downs the County surveyor said you have to go up about 60 feet. And after every blast we'd go in there, and boy, it would give you a headache. I'll never forget that last round. I was scared to death on that 36th station.

If that gas comes this way---but it didn't. On the Muldoon shaft they had those blowers sucking it out. Those blowers were big. Going up the road to the mine you could see them just sucking the air out. And thats the reason the gas didn't come our way. Course the experts knew that, but I didn't. I was scared.