

## MIKE BACKOVICH INTERVIEW

Q. Can I have your full name?

A. Mike Bakovich.

Q. What was your date of birth?

A. 1916, March 10, seven more days and I'll be 81.

Q. Where were you born?

A. Right here in Sutter Creek, over there (pointing to the right) where the house burned down at.

Q. What was your date of marriage?

A. The first time ....I was 22, she was 16, and I'm 81 now. About 1938, something like that.

Q. Where were you married?

A. Reno, Nevada.

Q. What was the name of your wife?

A. Helen Backovich, her maiden name was Richards.

Q. Where was she born?

A. Blythe, down on the desert or however the @#\$\$% you pronounce it.

Q. What was your occupation?

A. Do you mean when I worked in the mines or...

Q. Well, normally...

A. Last few years, I've worked under a Local Three Engineer. For 22 years, and I retired there. Before then I had water trucks. I never worked in the mines, steady anyhow. I wouldn't have been here today if I did. You see them up there in that picture (pointing to the wall)? There they are. I don't think there's one or two left out of that whole crew. I know of one. There's the other one of the Old Eureka (pointing to another picture).

Q. Those are both from mines?

A. That one down here in Sutter Creek, Old Eureka. Yeah that's Argonaut up there, that was taken in '39.

Q. What was your spouse's occupation? Did she work?

A. No.

Q. What was the name of your mother?

A. Milka - I don't know how in the hell you pronounce it. I never did know her. She left when I was two years old and my father, I stayed with him until I was 10 years old. He died when I was 10.

Q. Did she use her maiden name or Backovich?

A. She used Germasich - I don't know how in the hell you spell it - she was Slavonian. She took off with a guy that year and took off to Chicago. I think I've seen her twice in my life. That's the only time I've seen her before she died, and once she was out here. My sister brought her out. But that's the only time I've seen her. I didn't know who the hell she was. Didn't know she was my mother, or who the hell she was. No, Dad's been gone a long time - 70 years. March 10 he's been gone - the mines killed him. Hemorrhaged to death. "Rock in the box." You get that quartz in your lungs and then it'll pretty quick eat your lungs out, and then the hemorrhagh.

Q. What was the name of your father?

A. Mitchell. He died in 1925.

Q. Do you remember his date of birth, or place?

A. No, I don't remember the date. He was born in Yugoslavia. They all come from the old country, mother and all.

Q. What did he do?

A. He worked in the mines. He died of the miner's consumption, "rock in the box."

Q. Did he work around here?

A. Central Eureka. They finally closed it down years later. Well, @#\$\$%, that's what this Mother Lode was established as, mines, not for those @#\$\$% junk shops they got going around here. If it weren't for the mines, what the hell, you work for nothing. I think where my dad came from, the old country, he got about \$1.75 a day working in the mines, running the machine and sucking all that goddamned quartz dust in his lungs. Then they went to \$4 and it stayed there until the day I got canned from the Argonaut Mine. They done me a favor, like the foreman says. "Don't stay with them, or you'll be up with them on Marlboro Orchard."

Q. Is that a cemetery?

A. That's right, that's where all them are today. I just lost a buddy about three months ago. He worked in the Argonaut. Stan Truscett (sp?). He used to be a skip tender at Argonaut. I've seen a lot of them go in the last 50 years. Well, you take all them, take about 50 to 60 percent of those guys, all Mexican and Spanish, Baskos (Basque?), Spanish, Mexicano, Slavonian, Cousin Jack, oh @#%.

Q. How many kids do you have?

A. I raised five, four boys and one girl. One got killed here 15 years ago. Let me see, there was Mike, Tom, George, Eloise and um, how many do you have there?

Q. Four.

A. Four? Let's see, where the hell did we miss on at? Frank, the one that got killed.

Q. Do you remember their dates of birth.

A. No, no I don't. Just one of them.

Q. Do you have any brothers and sister?

A. I have one living with me, she is 90 years old. Ann Rogers.

Q. Do you know the day she was born?

A. 1906, September.

Q. What was your education?

A. I never finished grammar school. I made it to the last one, eighth. Hit and run, huh? I never had nobody to teach me nothing, or give me an education. @#%. You live with people from the old country, who don't speak English, they don't know @#% from English anyhow. Like when I went to school, the teacher would ask me a question and I would answer in Slavonian. I didn't know what the @#% she was talking about. @#%. It ain't like it is today.

Q. Did you have any military service?

A. Yep. I was down in Mineral Wells, Texas, in the 67<sup>th</sup> Infantry. I was for about eight months and eight to ten days, something like that.

Q. And that's the Army?

A. Yep.

Q. Do you have any civic activities?

A. Nope.

Q. What jobs did you do in the mine?

A. I used to help timber. We used to timber where they would blast. Then I used to push carts. I used to use the muck stick, shovel in the ore. There wasn't any other jobs in there. You would push car, you would help the miner put in timber, or whatever he was doing, or help him on the machine when he was drilling, changing the steel for him. I used to go out there and powder and ask him how many fuses he wanted. Sometimes 20, and a couple boxes of powder, and help him fill the holes in. When he was ready, he would take the lamp and touch them off. Certain ones you had to open. You have to open the center first, then the sides, and then the litters. The bottom's what they call litters.

Q. Do you know about how many hours a week you would work?

A. Well...we used to work eight hours a day and there were no days off. If you were getting a full check, I think you would be getting \$67, 15 days. I think that's what it was. It wasn't a hell of a lot. You'd get about a \$100 a month. A helper gets \$4, and miners get \$4.50. If you were a skip tender, which was very few of them, maybe three or four of them in the whole damn business, they got \$5. All the jackasses got \$4 and \$4.50. It was hotter than the ????? of Hell. Yeah, if you didn't have compressed air down there you would have died. In Argonaut, in '22-'27, there was 48 men died. We had a fellow staying here, I don't know what the hell his name was, he was staying with my father. Well, he got it. There must have been a horrible death down there, suffocating.

Q. Do you know about how many days was expected a week?

A. I know we had to get 15 days in to get a full check, I think \$67.

Q. What was it like to work in the mines?

A. Well, it was dusty. If you didn't wet it down, it was hotter than hell. You know on 55 level, over there, was a guy by the name of Jim Dallas. He threw a couple of eggs down there and hatched two roosters. But he used to turn them every day and they hatched. Since they hatched I am sure you could figure how hot it was down there. It is hot! If it wasn't for you having air blown to you, you couldn't live down there because it's a long ways to hell, I'll tell you. Down there in 61, and then they had the sump. The sump goes down to...I think it opens another level. I left because...I think it closed down in the '40s or so when the war came. I think all together it went 63 to 64 hundred feet. I don't know if they mined much down there or not. The last level I worked at was 6100 feet. The rock was handled several different times before even reaching ground level.

Q. The further down you get the hotter you get?

A. Well, I don't know, it was so bloomin' hot. It was probably the hottest mine I've ever worked at. Now the Old Eureka was nice, it was only 3,000 feet deep. Then I worked up at Bunker Hill, the Italian mine, and they had a big glory hole. You would go down there and it would be all open where they mined all the quartz and rocks from it.

Q. Where was the Italian Mine at?

A. You go above when you hit Drytown, you go on that road that hits the mine, through a tunnel that used to go back 1800 to 2000 feet, to push the muck out. I tried all the mines. I tried one that was 300 feet. I got out before I was killed. If you go over to the bridge in Drytown you'll see the reservoir. That's where there was a shaft 300 feet deep.

Q. Do you remember sights and sounds from the mines? Was there a taste in the air from the mines?

A. A lot of people used to keep their ears plugged. Down there, when that machine starts up, pretty soon you won't hear nothing. The air tasted funny. You would go home and the next morning you'd start spitting out that black ????? It's kind of blue. All the air's compressed so you can't help your mouth to taste funny.

Q. Do you remember anyone else that used to work in the mines with you? Any friends?

A. Well, I don't remember a lot of names (looking down at picture of miners). Well, you see, the majority of these people are Mexicans. This is Johnny Petty (the foreman). Here's Truskett. He died two months ago. There's a lot of Mexicans. This is me here. Then this little fellow used to live near me. I don't know what happened to him. They cut him off. He was Big Beaver. But you see, all these people are Spanish and Mexicans. This guy, Bruno (pointing) used to be a jiggerbox. They called him "The Rat." He used to make sure you didn't take any highgrade from the mine. There's only a few alive in this picture. Bob Shea once told me, "Young fellow, you stay with these mines and you'll be on Boot Hill, too." He gave me the advice to work in the mines in the winter but work in the woods in the summer, and that's what I did and that's why I'm still alive. I think General Motors owned the Argonaut Mine. Yeah, if you want to go to Hell, that's the closest place you're going to get to it.

Q. Who was the foreman?

A. Johnny Petty and Jerry Aguilar ran the two shifts. They had the night shifts.

Q. (pointing to the picture): Who was the superintendent?

A. Hell no, do you think they want to be in the picture with those people.

Q. How many mines did you work at?

A. I started at Glucose, then Fremont for one winter. They sent me to another shaft to clean out a drift, to mine and we went down there and the light wouldn't burn and when the light doesn't burn you get the hell out of there. I tried it several times and finally I got a hold of the guy above us and told him he'd better get oxygen down to us.

Q. How would you compare other mines to the Kennedy?

A. Kennedy and Argonaut were like working outside. The other one I used to work at was like working in a tunnel. Most have been 1800 to 2000 feet. I've never been in the Kennedy. I think it is 57 - 58 feet (5700?).

Carlos Rodriguez  
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