

Interview of Norman Dal Porto

*Biographical sketch  
is included in the  
interview*

By Steven Campbell and Carlos Rodriguez

Key: A1: Norman Dal Porto

A2: Joan Dal Porto

Q: Name of your mother

A1: Ester Dal Porto

she was a telephone operator, in Jackson. One of the few night telephone operators in Jackson, she worked from 10 to 6 in the morning.

Q: Do you know her date of birth

A1: No I wouldn't

Q: Or place of birth

A1: Virginia City

*interviewed May 1997*

Q: Is that in Nevada

A1: Yes

Q: What was the name of your father?

A1: Nar Cheaso, N, a, r, I don't know how to spell it, Dal Porto.

Q: Do you know his place of Birth.

A1: Italy

Q: And his occupation?

A1: He was a carpenter and the family owned the hotel in Jackson.

Q: What are your children's names?

A1: One of them is Mary, Dal Porto the other is Peggy, Dal Porto. The date of births you'll have to check that with my wife. Peggy's a little younger than Mary and she's a registered nurse over in Calaveras County now, a surgical nurse, and the other girl is a school teacher.

Q: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A1: No, My wife does though, she'll give you a whole list of them if you want them.

Q: What was your primary and secondary education?

A1: All through grammar school, eighth grade, high school, Jackson, 3 years of college at Davis, graduate, non-degree.

Q: Your Profession?

A1: Forester, fire control, range management and I hold a professional foresters license, which is rare. They don't give it to people unless you graduated from college.

Q: Have you had any military service?

A1: Yah, too long, 6 years.

Q: What branch?

A1: I was in the Infantry, but I was a mine and bomb disposal officer, had a crew of 25 men

Q: Have you done any civic or community activities?

Did you ever hold office?

A1: I was the president of the California Wool Growers Association. I was also president of the sheep and goat raisers of California and the National representative of the sheep industry to the national border.

Q: Did you work at the mines?

A1: No I never worked in the mines but I worked around town at different jobs while in high school. Driving cows up from the canyon where the sewer plant is, every night so they could milk the cows for the hotel. The kids did all that kind of stuff.

Q: Did you know anyone that worked in the mines?

A1: Yah I knew quite a few of them but I couldn't tell you their names. What I do remember in 1921, when all the miners got killed. I was 3 going on 4 in 1921 and I remember them taking the dead ones out of the mine, and there was 48 of them and they left them right on the top. And identified them as they were doing it. As a young kid you never forget that. There was one they never did find for a long time. It was quit a few years later when they found him. He was in one of the drifts down there. The other thing that was bad about that whole thing was... all the men that worked down there had big families, lots of kids, they were all widowed so the town had to

try to take care of them. It didn't matter what nationality they were, everybody helped everybody. I worked as a meat cutter after the war at one of the butcher shops in town, and even to that day it was clear that in 1946 and 1947 they were still helping those people. Helping those people out with there meats. For example, I worked at Rajles butcher shop. We had orders to not give them fancy meat but to give them good meat and all they wanted for there kids. Then we would charge the big shots more money for their steaks and such to even it out.

Q: So you knew people that worked in the mines but you can't remember their names?

A1: Yah, there were so many and still some of their families in town.

Q: Do you know some of the jobs at the mining?

A1: No, I knew some of the guys that ran the hoist at the mines at Argonaut and Kennedy's in the later years when I got to be a teenager, they didn't let any young kids around the minds.

Q: Do you know what the working conditions were like in the Kennedy mine or other mines?

A1: They were tough. You would go to work early in the morning and bring a lunch and they would bring the lunches down to the miners in the ground and the miners would be there till 4 or 5

o'clock. They all had to walk back and forth to town. They had some boarding houses but most of them walked back and forth to town.

Q: What were the dates and birth of Mary and Peggy Dal Porto?

A2: Mary was born 7-21-48 Peggy was born 5-25-50.

Q: Your date of birth and date of marriage?

A1: I was born March 31, 1918 and married on 8-25-46.

Q: Place of marriage?

A1: Sallon Nevada

Q: What is your name?

A2: My name is Joan Dal Porto

Q: What is your date of birth?

A2: 9-17-23

Q: And your place of birth?

A2: Michigan

Q: And your occupation?

A2: I'm a legal secretary, my father used to work in the iron mines and the copper mines and the gold mines. The gold mines here he worked in the Kennedy and the Argonaut.

Q: Did you know anyone that worked in the mines? The Kennedy?

A2: Nim Tivets. My father Alfred Pennrose worked in the Argonaut mine. Bob Shay was the foreman at the Argonaut mine. Alex Ross was the superintendent at the Argonaut mines.

Q: What was it like living in a mining town?

A2: Fine.

A: Everybody knew everybody. You knew all the public business and everything else. All the kids knew each other and it didn't make any difference your nationality. Particularly after the disaster, then everybody really got together.



A2: This is a really nice community. There was one sheriff and one under sheriff and maybe one policemen in Jackson. There was no crime, nobody did all these terrible things.

A: And if you did anything bad they took care of you.

A2: And the mothers had a good network, if you did something bad they knew about it before you even got home.

Q: What would be a typical day for a child or teenager or adult during a work week in the mines?

A1: The kids never did work in the mines, at least out of high school.

A2: Some kids quit school to work, cause they had to. They couldn't afford to live or they weren't interested in going to school and they wanted to work. By then they would be pretty old too.

A1: They lived in day light and had to walk to the mines. If they lived in the boarding houses and went to work and that was in day light, they came home at dark. You can imagine how long of a day they had. They didn't come out of the shafts at all, the miners didn't. They would just lower the skips and run them out on that deal and then the Kennedy was over a mile deep. They had a strait shaft. They were as fast as hell. The guy that ran that deal, I used to go up there to sit and



watch him. That was after the war and we used to hunt with each other. You can't believe how fast that thing went and it was so deep down there, it didn't have any stations like Argonaut did. Argonaut had each level with a station and they stopped at each level and they had a bell that they would ring. It wasn't electric, it was a pull bell. They pulled the bell for the guy down below. The Argonaut they had to wait for the people to get on the skip. Then they would ring so many rings on the bell and the skip would go up. But the Argonaut had the same thing that they got across the highway there, and they had the same thing down in the mine. Kennedy didn't, it was a straight well.

Q: Did you live in town too?

A2: No on Butte mountain road, my folks had a dry land dairy.

Q: Were the mines really loud in Jackson?

A2: No it was the mills where they crushed the rock. Once we lived up on Kennedy Flat and you didn't even hear that mill... but the minute they shut it down the silence was deafening.

A1: It was going all the time and you didn't even pay attention to it. When one of them stopped you knew they was something wrong. They would close them down and you didn't know if there was going to be another accident or what it was. See the original mines, they weren't attached

then, after the disaster they hooked the two mines together under ground. I forgot what level that is.

Q: What was it like to travel from one town to the next?

A1: Well you can imagine how long it took. They had a stage that went to Ione everyday when I was a kid. Sometimes instead of going to Ione they went to the train depot in Martell. The guys from Jackson and Sutter Creek would get on the stage, that was before my time but I heard them talk about it, and they would get on the stage and go to Martell. Then they went to Ione on a train to go to school. That was where the school was, in Ione. And then they would come back in the evening again. All the old timers did that when they wanted to go to school.

Q: What type of entertainment was there in Amador county?

A1: We had the theater in downtown Jackson, I used to pick up tickets there, I was too young to sell them. We didn't have time to go there, everybody had to work. Those days the movies were fifteen cents, ten cents. That's all.

Q: Weren't there casinos and bars?

A2: All kinds of bars.

A1: ...and houses of prostitution, that was run pretty legally. The police knew where they were, and none of the pimps or anything could be in town. That was clear up to the war too, about 1955. The only ones that could be in town were the madams of the houses, and you knew where they were; where the houses were. It was pretty well policed. Nothing else was allowed in the county. That prostitution wasn't allowed in the county because they wanted to control it in Jackson. Now who was the politics, I'm not going to tell you that one. Later on there was some bootlegging going on at the same time. See all the hills around here had lines going' around them, they were vineyards. There was bootlegging up this country they had stills and everything else up here. Right at the end of our property there was a flat, that's where the still was. If you went up this road when I was in high school some guy would step out from behind a tree with a gun in his hand. So it was pretty well organized. A guy shot the guy, a bootlegger, from the top of that hill. Those things would happen.

Q: How many different ethnic groups where in Amador county at the time?

A2: All kinds. Slovenians, English, Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Indians...

Q: Any blacks?

A1: No blacks. We saw very few blacks. They just weren't here. The Chinese's did a lot of the work outlining the ditches in this county, all the stone walls. The Slovenians had their church here and the Catholics had theirs and the Protestants had theirs, they were only 3 churches here. I used

to sing in a choir at the Catholic church even though I wasn't Catholic. Then I would go across the street and sing for the other church. So everybody got along, it was a close community. Of course they had their closed communities too. They were kind of lined up on different levels of money. The people that were running the town stuck together and the people with more money kind of stuck together. The poor workers didn't get involved in too much of it because they couldn't afford it. You see my mother was a widow cause my father died when I was three years old. She had to keep me going' all the time. In those days they didn't believe in getting married again very often. She didn't believe in me getting raised by someone else so that was the way I was raised, it was tough. She didn't have any money, she had to make dresses for the big shots daughters and everything else. And since I was a short, pudgy, little guy, I would have to stand up there on a table while my mother was fitting these damn dresses on me. I'd be madder than hell. You figure out how you would be if you had to stand up there and let your mother fit these dresses on you. I used to hate those girls; but if it wasn't for them she wouldn't have been able to live.

Q: Do you remember the gambling halls and other businesses that were in Jackson before the mines were closed down in 1942?

A1: There was the Louver, the Rex, the Log Cabin, the Bank Club, the Pioneer, the California hotel had gambling too.

Q: Did you know the people who worked in them?

A1: New them all. Everybody new everybody. And they new how old you were and everything else. See with me I could go in early, they new my mother had to work nights. They policed it pretty good. I mean they didn't allow any outside drinking, the kids didn't do that. Of course you couldn't afford it either.

Q: Where did you buy your groceries, gasoline, clothes?

A1: Chicosolies, Casonellies, Mother Load Market, that's where I used to work, Safeway finally moved in later on, Spinco used to be called Spinetties and they had a grocery department.

Q: Who was your doctor and where was he located?

A2: Our doctor was doctor Kern and I don't know where his office was. There was doctor Low, he had his office up in Eagles home over by where Wells Fargo bank is now, it's still there, the building is. Doctor William's who was in osteopath. Doctor Cunperntino didn't get here until 1946. At one time there were only two doctors.

Q: Were the boarding houses operating when you were here and where were they located?

A1: Out on Jackson Gate, Terrisa's had a boarding house and Gerbenches had a boarding house up on Broadway. Bascalias. Polleti's where the Bonanza is now, they had a boarding house.



Q: What could you expect at a boarding house and how much did they charge?

A1: I couldn't tell you that.

A2: I don't know how much they charge but you could expect three meals a day, your room and they would pack your lunch when ever you shift was working.

Q: Did most families have cars?

A1: No most families walked until later when the model T's came about.

A2: In 1931 almost everyone had one. But before that everyone was too poor, they couldn't afford it.

Q: Was ranching and farming big in Amador county?

A1: It is about how it is now

Q: Was the timber industry large in Amador county?

A1: Less until after the mines. It started in 1941 after the war, that was when it really started.

Q: Who were the main loggers in Amador county?

A2: There were no loggers in 1941, it was Mac Donald.

A1: Each mine had its own saw mill

Q: What do you remember about the labor strikes against the mine owners?

A2: They had a strike in the 30's it was a union. It lasted quite some time.

Q: What memories do you have about living in Jackson?

A2: It's always been very nice.