

Interview with Anthony Wyszynski

Montreal, Wisconsin

18 March 1989

START OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer (I): An interview with Anthony Wyszynski, at his home in Montreal, Wisconsin. Anthony is age 77, and was an employee at the Oglebay Norton iron mine in Montreal, Wisconsin. Mr. Wyszynski, what years did you work at the Montreal mine?

Anthony Wyszynski (AW): I started May of 1942, and worked until the mine closed in 1962 in August.

I: How organized was labor in the mine, in the years that you worked?

AW: Well, when I first started the mine- they had- steel workers with the union, but it was not as well organized until after it got to be a closed shop where everybody had to belong to the union.

I: Can you recall any major strikes or differences between labor and management while you worked at the mine?

AW: There was a strike in 1949, and then there was one in '53, and one in 1959. The longest, I think, the mine they were off was about four months. And the strike in 1949 certainly the employees were allowed to stay underground, to work underground, to maintain it, and after the 1949 strike the union demanded that no labor was allowed to go to work underground, to maintain the mine for the companies benefit.

I: So in the beginning it was the unions that allowed certain employees to stay underground, but later on then they changed their attitude.

AW: Right.

I: So what did management do then? Did they have to call in people to-

AW: No, they just went down and kept the pumps running that pumped the water out. And made sure the air was circulating underground.

I: Management did that by themselves?

AW: Yeah, they had the foreman.

I: Do you recall what the purpose for these strikes were? What the problem was that the union wanted to strike?

AW: Well, they brought- they brought up the hourly wage in 1942 when I started, and the base wage was six dollars and forty-eight cents a day, and they gradually brought it up higher, and we got more benefits. Insurance, sick benefits.

I: Was safety ever a factor, that the miners wanted better safety conditions?

AW: Oh yeah, safety was a factor.

I: Was Oglebay Norton really concerned about the safety underground for their miners?

AW: Yes they were. They made sure that there was proper ventilation underground. Air was pulled down through one shaft, and went out through another shaft.

I: Back on the topic of strikes for a minute, were these strikes just local- just at this mine, or was it all the iron workers?

AW: It was that one. It was a nation-wide strike. The steel mills and all of them, all at the same time.

I: Nice.

AW: But the steel mills settled first, so they were back to work first, and we had to wait.

I: And the steel mills still had enough raw material stockpiled that they could keep going.

AW: Right, right.

I: But eventually, as soon as they ran out, then... How long were these strikes usually, were they settled quickly, or?

AW: Well the longest one I think we had was either three or four months. And that- they were- some of them were short lived, and that was the longest one.

I: Were they pretty violent strikes? Was the community really involved in it?

AW: No, they were just- they were just miner didn't go to work. There was no picketing. There was some picketing, but not- but there was no violence connected with it.

I: That was probably because it was a nation-wide strike, there was no real hard feelings between the management, at his particular mine, and the employees?

AW: No.

I: At this time of the strike, did the mine own your homes?

AW: Yeah, the mine had their company homes. They owned 'em, but the people like myself, that had their own home (they might've didn't though) they would have taken the ___ where I lived was the property.

I: Did the mine own any stores?

AW: Not when I was...not that I can recall. They didn't stores here.

I: Before the unions became really strong, can you recall any, like, blacklists, or anything, like if you messed up at the Montreal mine you wouldn't be able to go to Norrie and get a job in the mine? Were the management in the mines that closely interknit?

AW: No, I don't think there was any blackballing, unless you did something wrong in the mine that they put you on the blacklist. But outside of that men went from one mine to the other. Wherever they thought they were treated better.

I: Were you working on the regular eight hour shifts then?

AW: Yes.

I: And it was-

AW: It was eight hours.

I: How many days a week?

AW: Five days a week. And after the unions came in eight hours was from the time you left surface, until the time you came back. It was called portal to portal pay.

I: What kind of activities were there for the family of the miners? Was the community interknit very strongly?

AW: Yes, the mining company owned a building they called the Hamilton Club. They had bowling alleys there, pool tables, and a soda fountain. And they had a meeting room, and in the evenings the mining company employed someone to have a recreation room for the children of the town.

I: Were most of these activities free of charge?

AW: Most of the activities were free of charge, except for bowling, and pool etcetera.

I: Was the Hamilton Club only open to employees of the mine?

AW: Yes, anyone could go there...anybody could...

I: So the mine had the recreation and everything set for the families-

AW: Yeah.

I: And they took care of the children in the evenings-

AW: Yeah, well, Grandma used to work on the recreation project for the kids.

I: Was that a voluntary position?

AW: No, no, she was paid for that.

I: Exactly what type of work did you do yourself in the mine?

AW: Oh not- is this going? Well everybody that started in the mine had to work on what they called the station. Where the ore came from inside the mine was dumped into pockets, and then from the pockets it was loaded into a skip, and sent to surface. When you started on station it was your job to break up the bigger pieces so they would go through the grill, and into the pocket. Then after everybody worked there so long, and they were given an opportunity to take jobs in mining. There was electricians there, pipe-men; that piped water and air into the mining places. And there was a man that was what they call a track-man. It was his job to put new track into places where they were being developed. And they had timber-men, they would bring timber and lagging to places where they needed it, and haul out the old lagging and stuff that wasn't usable anymore. Then- next I was...I worked on the station about six months, and I went mining. I was mining about a year-and-a-half, two years. Then I got to be a track-man, because there were a lot of developing, and then there two of us working on the track. Had to put in new rails, and keep the old track in shape, the switches and everything else. We had to bend our own rails, to put the curves in the switches. After I worked underground for...about ten years then I got job on surface as a welder in the shop. And there we re-built and made new things for the mine. Every year I had to repair the bucket the bucket for the steam shovel, rebuild the lip with Manganese, and then we made new ore cars for underground, cradle type ore cars, and then it had the shop. There was a shop where they sharpened the drills for underground, sharpened the picks. They had a machine shop to machine all the parts. They had an electrician shop where they took care of the electrical work in the mine where they rewound the motors, replaced the motors. And then they had the... what was...and then the engine house. Place-men they were called, and then there was men underground, they were called skip-tenders. They were the ones that were loading the skip to send to surface, and then there was a cage-tender, his job was to transport the men up and down. Surface to underground, and underground back to surface. Then bring the materials down underground.

I: Did they process the iron ore right here, as far as breaking it up, and...everything once it came to the surface? Did they have their own processing plant to crush the rock and everything?

AW: After the ore got to surface, then it went through a crusher, and it was, if it was summertime, it was loaded directly into cars, railroad cars were just hauled to Ashland. In the winter time they stockpiled it, different grades of ore went in different stockpiles, and the rock ore that wasn't usable was sent to a different trestle altogether.

I: So did they use the trains in the winter time? Or was it just because the port in Ashland was frozen up in the winter?

AW: The Lake was frozen over, and they could not ship iron ore in the winter time.

I: Did all the mines up here, excluding the Oglebay Norton in Montreal which you worked at, did the mines in Norrie, and Wakefield, and that, did they process their- did they crush their own ore, and everything right there?

AW: They did the same as Montreal did, they crushed it when it came to surface, and it was shipped off from there. They had a shipping season that started in May, and then lasted up until...November.

I: How would you compare the output, of tons of ore, between the Montreal mine, and the other mines locally? Was Montreal seen as one of the bigger, higher producing mines, in the area?

AW: Well, yeah, it was the biggest producing mine in the area.

I: Were the other mines up here owned by Oglebay Norton?

AW: No, some of them were owned by...the Oliver Mining Company, which was a subsidiary of US Steel. Some were owned by Hanna. That's about...

I: How were the wages of the mines, compared to the mine you worked in? Were almost all of the mines paying about the same wage, would it be better for someone to shop around, and see which place paid the most, or was it fairly even?

AW: Well, the wages were practically the same. A lot of the work underground was done on an incentive basis. The more footage you got, the more wages you got.

I: Was it a-

AW: It was in development. ___ new drifts for crosscuts, and there was an incentive for the amount of ore that came out of your place.

I: Was that- that was an incentive just for the miners underground, or was there a profit sharing for all the employees of the mine?

AW: No, that was just an incentive for the guys that were working there.

I: Can you remember any major cave-ins or accidents, at the mine, while you worked there?

AW: Yes, there was...one year there was...they had about one or two a year, but there was nothing really that bad. In one cave-in there was, there was two men that got killed. That was the biggest. Outside of that it was just a single accident.

I: So the safety record was pretty-

AW: We had a very good safety record.

I: We were talking about the strength of the labor, up here, and the unions. How did that influence the politics of the area, with the mines? Did the unions have a lot of influence on that?

AW: Well when the...The miners operating- the mining company operated the city in their interest. Most of the men who were on the city council, I think there was only one or two that were not on the city council, were employees of the mining company. The politics... it was 1959 I think, when John F Kennedy made a trip around Northern Wisconsin and stopped at the mine, and greeted all the miners. It was his campaign tour. One year Hubert Humphrey came to the mine and did the same thing. It was as far as local politics, local politicians or county officers, they would come there and just pass out cards prior to election time.

I: Were a lot of the people that were, say, mayor, or had different local offices around the Montreal area, were they higher up in the mine? Were any of them mining administrators or managers?

AW: The mayor was safety director in the mine. And after he left then there were the... the chief engineer got to be...got to be the mayor, and most of the members of the city council were the higher ups in the mining company. The officials from the town here. Some were just the underground foreman, but outside of the upper job, the upper crust was all handled by the mining company itself. The treasurer, and the clerk, and the mayor, they were all higher ups in the- in the office.

I: Did the mines run the schools locally?

AW: No, the school was operated by itself. The school district operated the schools, but the mines- several mining officials were on the school board.

I: Kind of- How would you say it? It had a- there was a good chance that there'd be a little corruption with their leaders?

AW: Well...I wouldn't know about the corruption part of it, but they were the ones who were...you would cause a problem if you ran against them.

I: Did the- What about public safety? Who ran that at the time?

AW: The city operated that. The city had cops of their own...but that was all through the company, because the mining company was paying the biggest part of their taxes.

I: The mining- So the mining company operated the police station in Montreal?

AW: No, the city operated that. Through city expense. That was all influenced through the mine, and after the war broke out, in 1943- uh '41, in 1943 the mining company had an officer on duty also.

I: When the Second World War broke out, what was its impact on this area, as related to the mine? Was there a big push to increase the output of the mine?

AW: There was. There was a lot of people hired in 1941 and '42. It wasn't as difficult to get a job then as it was prior to 1941.

I: At that- Was there ever women ever employed by the mining company?

AW: Only in the office.

I: Were most of the administrators of the mine local, or were they brought in by the mining company?

AW: They were brought in by the mining company, the administration was brought in by the mining company. A lot of the guys- A lot of the men that worked here that were superintendents and such came from down around Crystal Falls, and Iron River, and through that area.

I: In your opinion, what brought about the close of the mine, and what year did the mine close?

AW: The mine closed in August of 1962, and I think the big concern was then, that was when taconite came out, and it was too expensive to mine iron ore, and ship the raw iron ore to the mills, because there was too much waste in raw iron. Pellets were more iron in 'em, and there wasn't as much waste.

I: Did the- Did you as an employee of the mine, before this, know the time would be soon, or was it just a big shock when they said they were going to be closing the mine down?

AW: Oh, it was a shock in a way, because they thought the mine would last them a lot longer than it did- It could have lasted longer if it wasn't for the taconite process.

I: Did labor have any influence on the closing of the mine?

AW: Oh, I think the demands by the union kinda forced the hand a little bit, but the hourly rate of the mine, when it closed, was the top hourly rate of the underground miners, and that was three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour. That was the top rate in the shop too, where I worked. Three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour.

I: Was that a comparatively high wage, for the times?

AW: Well, it is very- It was.

I: Could you describe what... Besides the obvious things. What happened to the community, when the mine closed down? How long did it take them to clean up and move on, and did the population severely decrease once the mine left, and so on?

AW: Well, the mine closed in August, and there was a lot of people left Montreal in September, and October, a lot of them then went to Kenosha to work for American Millers, because they sent somebody up here to hire people, and then in January of '63, the state of Wisconsin started a school for men who could go and pick up a trade, such as machinists, such that the men went out after six months of schooling, and then they were able to go elsewhere and work. Pick up a job.

I: Did the rest of the mines in the area close up for the same reason, that the grade of the ore was too low?

AW: The grade of the ore was low, but the taconite process had a lot to do with that. There was only one mine, I think it was the Peterson mine, that operated a year and a half, or two years longer.

I: Did the mining company give any employees the chance to relocate to a different mine?

AW: Well, they were... They had- gave some of 'em a chance, most of the men from the mine that went up there were the higher-ups from the office, went up to Eveleth, Minnesota. Where Oglebay Norton operated a pellet plant. Most of the people who went up there were people with authority from the mining company here. After they got going up there, then, there were a few men that went up there to work,

I: What did the mine leave the employees, if anything? The mining company.

AW: Leave the employees? Well, all they had to look forward to was a pension fund when they reached sixty years of age, and they gave the employees an opportunity to buy their homes that they lived in, but most of the homes, at that time, were bought up by Galebreath (spelled phonetically) from Cleveland, and he individually sold the homes to the people. The home that you lived in, you had the first opportunity to buy it.

I: Was it a reasonable price?

AW: Well, I don't recall what the price was, I think it was around twenty-six hundred dollars. That was a reasonable price then

I: You mentioned earlier, that once the unions came in, that you got better benefits and everything.

AW: Yeah.

I: At that time was there going to be a retirement program, or was it seen that the mines were going to be around long enough that, if I put my so many years in, I would have a nice retirement?

AW: Well, prior to the union, I don't recall of any pension plan that they had. After the union came in and organized the pension plan, the insurance plan- Before that there was no insurance, because the company had doctors of their own. If you had a problem, or if your family, all you had to was get out to the doctor's office, there was no charge for it. The union was the one who forced the pension plan onto the companies, like they did elsewhere.

I: Was there a certain number of years, that after that you could retire? Was there a number of years that you had-

AW: There was no set number of years. You couldn't retire- Well most of 'em couldn't or wouldn't retire until after '65. You were eligible for a pension, a mining company pension, at age sixty, provided that you had more than fifteen years of service.

I: I see. So it wasn't like- Well, how many years did you work at the mine total?

AW: Approximately twenty-two years.

I: And, basically, you're getting as much retirement as someone that put their fifteen in.

AW: No. Each year that you worked you got...I don't recall what the rate was, because it was a long time ago, but you got so much per month every year that you worked. That's the way your pension plan was figured out, and if you were over the age of fifty-five your pension plan was- your pension was a lot bigger, because the union, after the mine shut down, two or three years after, the union went after the mining company, and they increased the pension for the men that were fifty-five, and that was probably part of the problem that they, the mine, shut down. They had so many men between the fifty and fifty-five bracket that if they were to operate it a few years longer the pension plan would have been that much costlier.

I: So in your opinion that's part of the reason they decided to pack up and leave.

AW: Right. Well, with the taconite coming in that was a big- that wasn't much of a step, but it was a big help for them.

I: At the time that the mine closed, was other employment very difficult to come by around here?

AW: Well, there was no other employment around, unless you were working for the county, there was no small factories sort of thing that anybody would go to work in.

I: Anything in the lumber industry?

AW: The lumber industry was on the way out. There was no big saw mills or anything anymore.

I: So basically at that time, it was at the closing of the mines that this area became a retirement area soon after the-

AW: Right, right.

I: Do you ever think there's a chance that the mines will reopen?

AW: Well, that I cannot tell you yes, and I can't tell you no, and I don't know, but the costs of reopening it would be terrific. Because the Montreal mine right now is full of water, and I don't know how long it would take them to pump it out.

I: Must have been a problem with the water- the distance of it from the Montreal River.

AW: Well, know it would be- When I was working there the amount of water was about the surface ran directly into the river, there was no processing it at all, and now it would be a costlier operation to run the water, because they would have to process it in some way.

I: In sum now, I feel we've covered anything, is there anything that you feel we haven't discussed, that you'd like to say about the mine?

END OF INTERVIEW