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EVERYTHING IS JUST BIGGER

"There's already a reputation throughout the whole country as to the good workers on the iron range." Those were the words of my uncle, Jim Skewis, about the workers of the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company.

My uncle has been working in the iron industry just over twenty years. He started out at the Mather B Mine in Negaunee, working underground. From there he went to the Empire Mine where he worked in the pit, the concentrator, and the pellet plant. My uncle even worked at the Tilden Concentration for a short period of time.

My uncle was born August 20, 1952, in Peoria, Illinois. His parents were Wallace and Mary Skewis. He was one of five children. His brother is Mike, and his sisters are Sharon, Peggy, and Rosemary. He lives with his wife, Nancy, and two children Andy and Jessie.

My uncle has worked just about all of the operating equipment in the mills at the Tilden Mine and Empire Mines; currently, he works as a laborer at the Empire Mine.

Being a laborer, my uncle has to know how to run the smaller, mobile equipment there. The training needed to work as a laborer concentrates on how to operate some of the equipment and how to run the computer panels that operate the grinding mills. He has to know the different jobs in the plant so he can fill in on the job that they need that day. Although he has been involved in many aspects of the iron industry, he told me that the hardest jobs were when he worked underground, the actual

mining and the process of learning how to drill.

The other difficult parts of his job that my uncle mentioned are the proper patterns, charging and blasting the holes, moving the dirt out, as well as learning how to drive and to handle the big equipment.

The most dangerous situations that my uncle has been in occurred when he was raise mining. "When you would drill and blast over your head and climb back up underneath where you just blasted where all the loose rock might be," he explained.

Other dangers my uncle has with his job are working with explosives, and in the winter, driving the big equipment on the icy roads.

My uncle has witnessed a few minor accidents like when he broke his thumb and cut the back of his hand open when a chunk of rock fell on it. Or when he was drilling with what they called their opposite partners, "We were dayshift; they were afternoon," stated my uncle. When his opposite partners drilled into a hole, it exploded and blew back into them. "They were lucky it was only minor," mentioned my uncle. A not-so-minor accident that my uncle told me about was when a man was caught in a mudslide at the Mather B and was killed.

Safety procedures used at the mine include workers being required to wear hearing protection. My uncle says "It's the noise and the dust that you run into more than anything." My uncle's opinion on safety at the mine is that, "Basically they have a pretty good system, I don't think you see near the injuries that we had years ago."

He speculates that the reason for that may be because "the work force is quite a bit older than before. There are people

who have been on the job for years and know what has to be done." he theorized.

The equipment in the mines have changed over the twelve or thirteen years that my uncle has worked at the Empire.

"Everything is just bigger," he stated. The physical labor has changed to be automated and more machines have come to the mine. "I started out at the Mather B, underground, it was real physical work. You depended on other people, and it seemed like you did everything together," remembered my uncle. He always worked in a group when he was underground. Currently, in open pit mining, the workers do not work together much, and the managers of the mine are not local people. The co-workers that he does know are what he has enjoyed most about his job. "You met a lot...when we were underground everybody was a lot closer," said my uncle.

Working underground, my uncle and the other workers used to always depend on a partner. My uncle told me that co-workers can come in just about any kind and every kind of personality.

My uncle thinks that the mines that are still here are going to survive and produce what they have. According to my uncle, for C.C.I. to remain competitive in the future, they must keep the strong workforce they have and maintain quality production.

My uncle also thinks that education is very important because the laborer is being cut back and people are going to be needed that are more educated in different fields.

My uncle spends part of his free time involved with union activities. In the winter he enjoys cross-country skiing, he golfs and plays softball in the summer.

My uncle has told me a lot about his job at the mine. He is a very experienced worker and has worked in all conditions, even

outside in under zero degrees weather. It is easy to see that he is part of a group who helped get the good reputation that the iron range workers have throughout the country.