

Dan Pennala

fifty five

The Mayor of North Lake

"When I got out of high school there wasn't much around and that looked like it offered me the most opportunity at that time and so I was lucky enough to get a job" Norm Pennala stated as we talked in his home in North Lake about his working life.

Norman Pennala was born in North Lake on July 19, 1922. His parent's names were Elias, who worked for C.C.I. and Hattie Pennala. He had three sisters Eleanor Bennett, Martha Ulrickson, and Viola Williams. His wife's and my grandmother's name is Barbara.

As soon as Norm got out of high school, he worked in the Athens Mine as a sample picker. Later he became an analyst at the chemical lab and ended up as an operating foreman at the Republic Mine for seventeen years. His final job was at the Pellet Plant. Overall, he worked for forty-one years for C.C.I.

While Norm worked at the mines the working conditions were terrible. There were a lot of problem to overcome. Norm agreed that C.C.I always had a concern for safety. The union had a safety committee to try to keep the safety standards up to code. Norm thought that when he left safety standard were pretty good.

Working in a pellet plant must be pretty dangerous with all the hot pellets around, and there's just bound to be an accident. As I asked Norm about any accidents he was involved in, it seemed as if it was a difficult topic to discuss. Here is what he told me "It was at Republic we had a Down Comer from



the grate, and it was plugged. We had just started up our unit after a ten day repair. Consequently, when you start a pellet plant up you can't run it until you get all the heat up to where it is and where it was; supposed to be. You can't try anything before you start operating. You got to get it right up cooperating just so you could operate. Well they had an unfortunate problem. They had leaky grate and one of the down comers filled up with hot pellets, and they couldn't operate like that so they shut it down. They went down to the bottom to clean out hopper like we had fire hoses and alot of water and that hopper like I said was filled with red hot pellets. They got what they called a blow back. All the heat that was generated from the hot pellets and the cold water just blew back up towards the opening on the hopper. Hot black dust flew all over the place! Three men were burned and two died shortly after in the hospital."

Since Norm had so many different jobs, he had many different duties as well, "My jobs were just to keep the plant running from day to day and make sure there was all the schedules where filled and replacements in place if we needed any and production ran along. Met my quotas". If you can imagine working at a job that was just starting up in your community and having on the job training would be very difficult. Like Norm said you would have to "Fly by the seat of your pants". Plus with all the red hot pellets going around imagine the responsibilities Norm had to account for and all the production goals trying to make as many pellets as they could in a day.

For someone to have all those responsibilities and still



have to worry about wages would be torture. I can see why the workers liked having the steel workers union. "They know they got somebody looking over them on their places and they can get their demands met better because there is safety in numbers". Norm said "I used to go to union meetings when I was a union member every month we met. We would air out our grievances. If anybody has anything that they wanted our grievance man to look into, working conditions, job seniority, and pay. Then we would formulate our proposals that we were going bring up in the next union contract meeting in Duluth" he told me. If the workers demands are not met, there may be a strike. Norm had been on four strikes in all the years he worked and had a lot to tell about them and the picket lines. "A picket line is more to show solidarity that the people all on strike are all together and would stick together. I think the picket line also shows people that aren't really familiar why we're striking or somebody that's not in the mines or ya know about one of the big ones was at the Mather A one time when I think they had a bit of trouble on picket line". Norm went on to tell me of how he heard of fighting and some cars being flipped over! I was amazed at the length these workers would go to keep there wages and benefits as high as they possibly could be.

With all the things C.C.I. and Norm had been through, I had to know what C.C.I. had to do in the future to remain competitive. So I asked him "Well, I think they gotta have a good work force. They got good knowledgale men, I know I worked with a lot of those guys and they're all good guys and they gotta keep up with all the new innovations comin, up in pelletizing and the things they need howq to make steel. There



are different types of additives they are putting in the ore getting these mini mills. I think those are the things they gotta go right along with and stay with that and keep them happy and supplied".

Norm has led a very interesting life. Even though I am sure he loved his work, I know he loves his camp more. He spends his summers there and his winters in North Lake because he knows those are the only two seasons in the U.P.