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Eighty-three

RELIVING MEMORIES WITH TAISTO

"I don't remember what house it was on School Street, but I imagine it's still standing," were the words of Taisto Syrjala talking about his birthplace in addition to talking about his experiences working for various mines.

Taisto Syrjala was born on October 15, 1918, in the North Lake Location. His mother, Selma, was a machine operator in Ishpeming, while his father, John Syrjala, worked in one of the Marquette mines as an underground miner. Taisto had one sister, Celia, who was married, but died shortly after at quite a young age.

Taisto also had two daughters, Celia Stankorb who now lives in Dearborn, and Judith Carroll who is currently married to Bob Carroll, and lives in Roy, Utah.

"It was the best job available for me," stated Taisto as he began talking about his career. He worked for thirty-eight years in a few different mines including the underground Cliff Shaft Mine, and the open pit Empire Mine.

Taisto learned many of his job duties by on the job training. He did not have to go to school to get his job. He did many mining jobs including drilling and blasting, and moving ore. As a contract miner, it was he and his partner together underground, and they were kind of isolated at times from other groups. At the Empire Mine, he worked a good portion of the time

as a production truck driver, and his last five years he worked as a blaster. "I used to say if you are a truck driver you would climb up in the truck at the start of the shift, and you wouldn't come down until quitting time. You would be up there just going back and forth with the truck," included Taisto.

The physical labor was probably the hardest of challenging duties that Taisto has had to perform. There was more bull-work in the pits, but when he was driving the trucks, it's so much physical work. The size of the trucks was so big. "It takes a little while to get used to something like that when the trucks are bigger than the average room," added Taisto. The working conditions underground were more hazardous than in pit-work with the equipment and machinery.

In underground mining, almost everything used some kind of special equipment or machinery. In some instances like drilling, and the blasting of the ore was done with what you called a raise where it could go down, and the ore would be trapped out from the shaft.

The Cliff Shaft Mine was all under the city of Ishpeming. "Its all worked by room and pillar methods, so there are some pretty big openings down there. There was always a danger of something loose dropping. What they call a bad ceiling," stated Taisto.

When a worker was underground, there were many things to watch out for, but safety was the biggest. "Safety was the biggest responsibility especially underground being in pit-work. You had to work safely to protect yourself, and everyone else involved," Taisto included.

When Taisto worked for Cleveland Cliffs Iron Co., they were

always pretty strict on safety. "It's what you did on your own more or less that you had to work safely," added Taisto. "When I was underground, they couldn't be watching me all that close, I was on my own, and had to make sure that I did work safely to protect myself," Taisto added. "I've never had a lost time accident in my thirty-eight years," stated Taisto. He has just had one brother-in-law, and a few friends that have gotten hurt, nothing serious, just a few broken bones.

Taisto described his workmates as "A good bunch of guys. There was always a lot of joking and good natured kidding around, especially underground where there were smaller crew," he explained. That's something since retirement that Taisto misses.

When Taisto started at the Empire Mine, it was just chainsaws they used to clear trees off the land. When he had finished that job, he and his workmates would have to clear off enough of the older stumps that remained there, so it could be drilled and blasted. It was more or less a test run than to see how it was going to work. "We cut trenches right across the hillside at the Empire, and that one was crushed at the old volunteer mine crusher," says Taisto. They had an experimental cascade mill set up there, where they put the ore just to see if it was going to work on the larger scale at their research lab. They also had an experimental mill at the research lab where they crushed about one hundred-thousand tons of ore and ran it through the grinder to see how it was done. "That was probably the start of pelletizing and grinding at the Empire Mine," explained Taisto.

As Taisto and I were discussing the future, he gave his opinion on what he thought it would hold. "I think it's going to

be good for both the Empire and the Tilden," he said. As for the steel industry, he thinks the company will always need steel and of course they've got to have iron ore too.

The Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company's will be remembered for being a big producer of iron ore pellets. The Empire Mine will be remembered for their research. "The research alone is what really got the Empire started. The Humbolt was going earlier, pelletizing, but they now have a research process that's really kept them going," Taisto stated.

The skills young people today need to develop for mining are almost all training, learning how to use a computer, and of course going to college. "Get as much education as you can, because the learner needs it," Taisto states.

Looking back over the years, Taisto has had many impressions that stand out in his mind. He explains that saying, "I think they've been a pretty good company, I think as far as my own works and labors, I think the majority of the people who work for CCI, the company profits by their efforts, so it's kind of like a mutual healing."

Taisto was also involved in a union and has had a few experiences being on strike. The strikes actually started in 1946, and there was one in 1952 and 1962. A strike actually begins when the company and its workers cannot come to a settlement. The workers become very stubborn, and the companies do not want to give in. Being in a union is the only weapon that the worker has. At one time, when all the mines were going, they had about 3,000 men on strike. The purpose of a picket line is to show strength and solidarity, and prevent what Taisto called "scabs" at work. At one time Taisto recalls being on strike a

little over one-hundred days starting in a cold January month. "In fact, in those days we didn't have the kind of strike fund they have nowadays when they go on strike. At that that time it was only a little bit of a handout, and they might have got a little "puuroa" (oatmeal), or something like that," he included.

In Taisto's opinion, the steelworkers' union is so important to the workers because the workers do get a lot of benefits. "Even I as a retiree, I'm reaping the benefits of what is a pretty good pension," he said. The mine's new contracts will always have pretty good change for the ones who are still working then, and that are going for retirement. On this latest contract, we do have a couple "lumps" on payment coming every now and then," he states.

In Taisto's spare time, he enjoys going to camp during the summer to do some fishing. Also on Friday afternoons, there are a bunch of retirees that go bowling.

During this interview with Taisto Syrjala, I have learned a great deal about him, his family, and his career. I am very thankful that I have had the chance to interview such an interesting and thoughtful man.