

# Eric Wikman

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## "That's Why I Chose to Come Back"

Jerry Oja began by telling me "I wanted to live in Marquette County and that's why I chose to come back and work for Cleveland Cliffs."

Jerry Oja was born September 9, 1937, in the Bell Memorial Hospital. He was raised in the Humbolt area, and he attended the Champion High School.

His father's name is William Edward Oja, and his mother's name was Inga Elizabeth Oja. He had two brothers, and three sisters.

Jerry earned a B. S. degree in Mechanical Engineering from Michigan Technological University where he graduated in 1958. He worked in various mines throughout his career. He started at the Republic Mine where he worked for about five years. He moved to the Empire Mine, and he worked there for over ten years. He concluded his career working at the Brownstone.

When Jerry started off he was an engineer at the Republic Mine. He subsequently held positions as the maintenance superintendent, plant superintendent, mine superintendent at the Empire, and he finished as a Central Shops superintendent.

As the mine superintendent and second in command for the Empire, he was responsible for the entire operation of the mine. At the time of the peak employment at the Empire, there were 1200

employees. The goal of the plant was to produce the pellet tonnage at a competitive price per ton. He was responsible for all phases of the mine including operations, maintenance, safety, and grievances.

The most difficult part of his job was working many long hours and being on call at night. Especially difficult was when he had severe accidents or fatalities on his hands. These duties were most difficult. "These were very emotional and they bothered me for many days afterward," Jerry stated. It was also difficult handling grievances and in later years negotiating contracts with the unions especially when they were concessionary type contracts.

Jerry witnessed two fatal accidents throughout his career. One was an electrician who was killed at the Republic mine when a motor starter exploded and caused severe damage. He was taken to the hospital and died afterwards. The other was a production truck driver who backed over a rock dump and was killed instantly.

Jerry enjoyed his job the most when he had high production tonnages, "When those were met I guess that gave me the most satisfaction and because it resulted by good effort by many people." Jerry said. "And I think the memories you would recall working for the excellent work course I think that's one of the things that was proven."

The duties Jerry performed changed a little over the years. "I go less to make the most tonnage no matter what it took, and we could still sell the pellets," Jerry said. But in the later years the industry became a worldwide competitive industry, and the mine was required to produce the same tons with less manpower

and also when they had to produce these tons at a continually improved quality which was a challenge.

The working conditions at the mine were not very good in some places, there is a lot of noise in the plant. It is extremely hot and humid in the pellet plant in the summer, and it is very cold in the winter. The temperature was not consistent.

Jerry was continually responsible for new projects. One project was construction and startup of the expansions at the Empire. These projects were very expensive because the mine had to spend millions and millions of dollars which caused an increase in the workload for all employees during this period.

The safety standards at the mines were continually improving by increasing the training of the employees and by buying better equipment. "And I think this will be a continuous change in improvement on both of these in the future," Jerry stated.

The key to the success of CCI the way Jerry told me was "I think Cliffs is willing to spend research money to improve the product. They are willing to reduce the manpower to increase the tons per man."

In order for CCI to remain competitive, they have to continue to improve by working smarter to increase the tons per man by improving work procedures buying the latest and best equipment and "continue to work as a team," Jerry said.

History will definitely remember CCI because it has been here for about 130 to 140 years and "It's affected the lives of so many people and has had such an impact on the community that they will be remembered," Jerry told me.

Jerry has some advice for young people of today "Study hard in high school and college; sacrifice a little now and it will

pay you ten-fold in the future."

I am very happy to have been able to interview my uncle Jerry. He is an interesting man who is very talented in many things. uncle Jerry is always happy, and he is ready to do almost anything you ask him.