

Kelly Ruohonen's Interview
with June Pontti.
January 2, 1985 Barnes-Hecker

Me - How old are you?

GP = I am 70 years old.

Me = When were you born?

GP = I was born on June 28, 1914

Me = Where were you born?

GP = Ishpeming

Me = Where did you live when the Barnes-Hecker

GP = was operating

I lived on North 2nd Street

Me = How old were you when the Barnes-Hecker
Mine disaster occurred?

GP = 13

Me = How many people were in your family?

GP = Well I have a twin brother and have 2 other
brothers There were (pause) 6 of us.

Me = What is your mother's name?

GP = My mom's name is Clara. (Clauda) - (Silas)

Me = How did your family find out about the
disaster?

GP = Well (Pause) my mother was at some kind of a
meeting that afternoon, a church meeting and my
older brother came down and met her and he told
her about. And I heard about it after school.

(inc) My mother I was at the mud lake dump and that's
where I heard about it.

Me = Do you know any people that were killed in the
mine?

GP = Yes, I knew my two neighbors especially
because they lived across the alley from us.

Me = what were their names?

GP = And their names were Kirby, there was a father and ah and a son the son was called Tom and I think the father was called (pause) Tom too. Thomas, and Tom Jr.

Me = From what you remember could you tell us about your mother's dream?

GP = Oh, well, what I remember my mother that day she didn't tell us till maybe it was later in the day when she recalled the dream she had had that night and I don't remember her mentioning it in the morning because we had gone to school but when she heard about it then she started to tell us about the dream, she said she had dreamed she was standing in the backyard by the back gate and and she was looking out over ^{across} ~~ah~~ we lived ~~across~~ on the edge of town then and we could look kind of west from our house and they were all the hills ^{there} the highway goes through there know we call the place ~~there~~ ~~know~~ out that way ~~the land of the lost~~. (playground) anyhow she ^{to the last} ~~lost~~.

was looking out over in that direction and the whole sky was a ~~great~~ big red glow and and Mr. Kirby Sr. was in his backyard and she said Mr. Kirby look at this, what do you think of ~~it~~? and he stood there and ^{he} just said My, My (laugh) My and I guess that's what I remember her saying. He couldn't figure out what it was and she, she was wondering too.

and then she said, I don't remember the rest I just remember that ~~she~~ they both stood looking at this red glow in the sky and they were wondering what it was (pause) and that's the most I can remember about what she's told us about that dream, but when she heard the news immediately she remembered it she said well ^{that could} as far as she was concerned that was some kind of sign that something was going to happen.

Me: Did you ever go over to the mine site after the disaster?

Gp: Not right after I never went there for many years after. I only went there in the last 10 years. Ah In fact No one was aloud to go around that mine site because they had sealed it off.

So we and of course in those days we didn't have the transportation that we have now.

Not to many of us had cars and we couldn't be going around there they encouraged every-
body to ^{out} stay away. I imagine that the people that lived in the area were there. (that's why they lived in those mining locations)
Yeh because they didn't have transportation
so when ever a mine opened and this was a fairly new ~~one~~ mine ah this was a new mine & they were just building a ~~new~~ location and ^{and also} all of the houses would be right around the mine. And that's why that day the women were over there with the lunch buckets.

waiting for the men to come up from at noon hour they were gonna give them there lunch.

Me = Was there any type of security around the mine?

GP = Yes, after, but I don't know ~~what you mean~~ ^{anything about} by security then. I don't know what they mean by security.

Me = Well like um

GP = (Well your not aloud to go rambling around there.) Yeh oh

Me = Yeh

GP = Oh yeh, they must of had some kind of security ^{to close} to the mine. because you never were aloud to go

Me = Did any people ^{live} around the mine area?
GP = ~~No~~ the area was abandoned, the whole area was abandoned. ^{live} the people moved out they Oh lots of people moved out en they lived in the but not now North lake location, Ishpeming and there was a Dionite location ~~locations where people lived~~ and west ^{and we still have those locations where people worked}
They all moved out of that Barnes-Hecker area.

Me = Was there any danger to the people ^{lived} lived around there? ^{that}

GP = No, No not that I know of.

Me = How many bodies did they find?

GP = Well, uh they said that they found uh 7 and two of the bodies they found were ^{uh 7} my neighbors

GP= and I, I well remember that because ^{they} they I went to the house to see them and one of the bodies, the young Tom they showed him, he was the one that was on the ladder behind and this ah Wills that did get out of there and just before he ~~reached~~ ^{got to} the top the whole thing caved in and he went down with it and that's how they found him there but the other bodies they found in the shaft that went into the Morris Mine they they had been from the water the force of the water they had been forced in there and they said they were badly damaged so they didn't show the bodies but they had the casket in the house and I always remember going into that house and seeing the caskets there and I was only 13 so I was really ^{two} impressed you know with the tragedy it was so awful, everybody was weeping (pause) there was one ^{everybody} girl in particular that was in my room that sat two seats behind me and there still, I'm sure ^{there's} members of her family living in National Mine now because she was called Trudell I can't remember her first name. P

Me= Did they attempt to find the other men.

GP= yes, they did try and they tried ah well they tried to seal it off so they could have some safety ~~while they were~~ ^{there and} looking for the ~~men~~ but they gave it up soon because the water kept coming through.

Me = How did your mother react to the disaster right after her dream?

GP = Well, my mother was panicky she ~~was~~ was so upset that she couldn't sleep I think and and the fact that that she said the fact that my older brother had just tried to get a job there, just two weeks before (pause) she was really upset and my father worked in a mine he worked at the Barnum Mine at that time so she was really upset and worried but I think everybody was panicky at the time.

Me = Was there a memorial service held for the workers?

GP = I don't remember that they had any special memorial service I don't recall that maybe they did but I ~~don't know~~ ^(pause) only 13 and I don't remember that. I I don't know.

Me = Did you ever hear a ~~statement~~ ^{statement} from Mr. Wills on the news or in a paper?

GP = Well, yes in the paper ~~we~~ ^{they} didn't have a ~~hit~~ ^{hit} on the radio at that time we didn't have radio then. so everything came out in the paper and the ^(pause) ^{news} that you would hear would be by mouth to another about the cave-in the guys ~~came~~ ^{came} rushing ^{soon} ^{as they} down town to tell the news and then it got ⁱⁿ ^{as heard} the paper and Mr. Wills was interviewed by the paper and he told of his experience of climbing that ladder and how it broke and he was lucky that he was close

enough to get on that ladder because an because the cage that went down into the mine wouldn't go down it was stuck on the third level but they were were working close to the shaft and they were able to get a hold of the ladder and they decided to climb it but just as they got to the top the whole thing the the force of the water came and wiped it all out took it right down and all the men with it.

Me= What school did you go to?

GP= I went to the Grammar School at that time and I was in 7th grade.

Me= Were there a lot of students that lost a relative?

GP= I think there were a lot because an well I don't know the National Mine, kids from the National Mine area had been going to our school at that time. I don't understand that because they had a school at National Mine! but they were going to our school and I don't know how they got there? they must of walked? they must of walked in! yes they had to walk

Me= How many days did they look for the men?

GP= I I don't remember how many days I don't remember how many days (about 3 or 4 weeks) yeh. there wasn't an they new from the beginning they weren't going to find they thought they'd look for the bodies but they knew they weren't going to find them because

the mine was completely flooded all the tunnels were filled up with water. It was just, and those guys 7 men that they did find they were lucky that they just got washed into ^{get} were just they did (pause) into the Morris Mine. or Me= How did this disaster affect you and the people.

GP= Well I think it effected all of us for a long time we were all quite shaken (pause) and you know (pause) "not having radio or television or any thing at that time just papers and everybody ^{people} talked about it constantly and the fact" that mining was our main ah work here in town nearly every body worked in the mine so I'm sure that we were all shock for a long time this place was all mining so I think long everybody was worried every time they went into mine that something would happen ^{down} again. (pause) but this was a soft ore mine and it was ~~fairly~~ new and...the ore just caved in fast when the water got to it.

Me= Is there anything else you would like to say?

GP= um... (pause) let me think now it seems like it's all a vague memory now it's been so many years since it happened. every time I see one of the Kirb boys I'm reminded of that disaster you know because there's still a couple of them around here and they've always been good friends of ours every time I see them I think I remember that easier yeh they were our playmates but Tom was older and he was married and the one thing I remember ~~yeh~~ ^{well} his wife they hadn't been married long and they were expecting a baby.

at the time and of course that baby
was born after that and she remarried and I
just recently found out who it was she married
and I forgot. They also had a sister they had
~~at~~ Kirby's family um lets see there was Betty
and Dick and Tom and (pause) Johnny and Bill
there were 5 boys and 1 girl and the girl I
think might have been the oldest and she ^{was} called
Arla and her name and she's still living some-
where in town v now she's the one if you could
of got a hold of ^{she's called Mrs. Collier} her she would be fun to inter-
view. I know her but I don't know where
she lives (wonder if anybody knows her)
but ah it would be nice ah interesting cause
she would remember it well because she was
the oldest in the family. Bill was married and
Tom was married and she was married those
two were married maybe she was not the
oldest then. You know I had the same feeling
I had the same feeling we all had the same ^{when that}
feeling when that happened and the day that I
was listening to the television and they said
that J.F. Kennedy was shot for days after we
all felt like crying inside of us. ^(pause) We just couldn't
get over it. Yeh you know when they first worked
in the mines they didn't have those lights they
had candles on their hats (pause) a long candle
if that candle went out they were in trouble
and there were rats down in the mine. They
said the rats were the were a good thing to have
but they had to watch their lunch buckets
because they'd eat there lunch but (cough)
many times there's a disaster the rats will all
run and and when you see the rats running
you know there's something going ^{to} happen.

Lots of in the coal mines lots of times
I think they said that about (feed the
rats) oh sure. and they were big but those
guys were just drowned that's what happened
to them they were you know they were
drowned they were hit by everything there
was falling debris and.

Me= Did the mine fill up like from the top
did it start at the top then like

GP= The top went down in went into the
mine and then it started coming up
The lake went right in and then it started
rising (tree stumps and branches everything)
yeh (it come up like woof!) (just like
that.

GP= OK I said I forgot to tell you the most
important thing about those days whistles
whenever there was anything happening in
the mine there would be whistles would
blow they used the whistles to start in the
morning and they'd have whistles all day
long and (pause) if any body was lost lots of
times in the summer ah somebody would
go up and pick berries or a child would
get lost they'd start blowing the whistles
and they'd keep blowing them until they
were found (pause) and that day the
whistles started to blow it was in the
afternoon I don't remember when I heard
them but I do remember the whistles and
it filled everybody with fear because they
knew something terrible had happened

GP= and that was the 1st indication }
that they had that there was a }
disaster because all the whistles }
started to blow all over the place.