

JOHN MARINONI
Oral History Interview

Statewide Oral History Project, Abandoned Mines Reclamation Program
Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining

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My name is Lee Bennett and I'm here at the Pinnacle Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Price, Utah to interview John Marinoni for the Utah mining history project. Mr. Marinoni is very hard of hearing and his daughter, Charlene Dupin, is here to help him with the interview. The interview is being recorded by Jim Mattingly.

LB: Can you give me your name and date of birth, John?

JM: I was born December the 3rd, 1919.

CD: Twelve, 1912.

JM: Yes, 1912.

CD: What's your name?

JM: John Marinoni. Well, I was born December the 3rd, 1912 [John was 100 years and 5 months old on the day of the interview].

LB: Ok, good. Where were you born?

JM: In Rovetta, Italy.

LB: When did you come to the Price area?

JM: I can't remember. I think I was around 8 years old.

CD: When did you move back to Price? You were here in 1931 working in the coal mine [he was 12 yrs old]. You came down on a freight train from Idaho.

JM: Yes.

CD: Where did you work [when you came to Price]?

JM: At Maple Creek. That was a Greek mine¹ and I was put there to pick the boney, the rock out of the coal. But I couldn't tell the difference between the black coal and the black rock and it took quite a while to learn which was which. I finally learned it more by weight than by color.

LB: So you're not from a long line of coal miners?

JM: No, no, I'd never even been inside of a mine until my dad took over. I didn't know what to do.

CD: That was 1946 when Dad went back to the mine.

LB: And your dad owned the Soldier Creek Mine at the time?

JM: Yes, it was him.²

CD: And why did you move back [to Price]?

JM: Dad needed men to work [in the Soldier Creek Mine] and he got me to help him out. But I was not very good at knowing any movement, coal, or what color and stuff like that. I was more in the black than in the bright [laughter]. I had a hard time learning which was which.

LB: How did you mine at the time? What kind of equipment did you use?

JM: By hand, shovel by hand. And drilling by hand, drill the coal by hand. Then they mechanized that. They put in power to run the drills to drill the coal. I didn't do much of that, they hired fellows who knew all about that. I was more in the dark than I was in the bright. I had a hard time learning what they did. Knowing what to do, I didn't; I was never a good miner.

CD: You were the boss.

JM: Oh boss, all you did was interpret the knowledge is all. Well, you might have to do it this way, you might have to do it that way. As far as non-interpreting how to do it, I never was a knowledgeable miner. My dad would interpret all that stuff. To me it was all stuff that I couldn't understand what it meant.

¹ According to History of Carbon County by Ronald G. Watt, the Maple Creek Mine was established in 1926 on the south side of Spring Canyon west of Helper, UT. It was operated by a partnership whose members were of Greek ancestry. A fire in 1931 damaged the tippie and equipment, but the operations resumed after repairs were made. The mine struggled financially and was closed in 1937. The 1940 census indicates that John Marinoni was living in Deadwood, SD by 1935, where he was employed as a mechanic for a gold mining company. Thus John's time at the Maple Creek Mine was probably between 1931-1934.

² John's father was Andrew Marinoni. At the time of the 1940 census he and his wife lived at Hay Creek, Crook County, Wyoming where Andrew owned a coal mine. He was 54 years old and a native of Italy, and he had lived at Hay Creek since at least 1935.

CD: Dad, when you were in the mines you saw things that you wanted, you were more of an inventor. You made things to improve the life for the miners and do better, right?

JM: Yes. Well, I improved a little bit on different equipment. I improved more on thoughts but knowing how to do it, I never was knowledgeable about how to do lots of stuff. I was more feeling my way through by doing it how my dad told me to do it. My dad was more satisfied watching me do it when he told me how to do it. He was always satisfied the way I would do the work.

CD: You were a welder.

JM: Yes, I did nothing but welding at that time. I had worked in the shipyards as a welder and I learned the welding pretty good. I got hurt a lot of times, working around welding. A chunk of iron fell down and squashed this hand [his right], fact it's all limbered right now, but it never bothered me. This finger here is dead, and I've lost part [of the feeling] of that. And this one is all crooked. They [the fingers] are all unusable. I laugh, I grab something I'd have to have the other hand to help. I was never good with the right hand.

LB: Now, when you were working there at the mine for your dad, where was your family living? Was there a camp at the mine or did you commute from town?

JM: Commuted from town. We had a home. Dad and Mother had rented a home in Price.

CD: When you were working at the mine everyone lived in Price and you commuted to the mine. The only one that lived at the mine was the night watchman.

JM: Yes, that's all. As far as knowledgeable places I can't tell you. I could never figure out half of that stuff, what to do. When I was supposed to be picking the rock out of there, I didn't know the difference between the black rock and the black coal.

LB: Can you kind of remember what a typical day might have been for you? What time did you go to work?

JM: We'd go to work at normal.

CD: About 4 o'clock in the morning.

JM: We'd always try to be there by 5. The coal was starting to come down and you'd try to pick it, pick the rock out, but that was quite a chore for me. It took a long time for me to learn which was rock and what was coal.

LB: What kind of tools did you help to improve on?

JM: Not much [laughter]. The only thing to improve on was the shovel and the pick.

CD: You invented the fan.

JM: Yes, I made the fan for the mine for ventilation. That was a poor set up because I didn't understand it too well. And then later on with the help of an experienced fellow I learned how they made these things for them.

CD: But you put in a continuous miner. You put in a belt.

JM: Yes. A piece of belt broke and wrecked my hand. Then I learned how to use it [his hand], but it was never like it should have been. I still got usage of it and I can do a lot of things I should do. But if I have to grab something I have to use both hands. I have to use the left hand to help hold with the other.

LB: Were there any safety regulations that you had to follow?

JM: Oh yes, yes. You couldn't use different tools, there was regulation of tools. And sometimes they told you it was not useable. They'd change that over and tell you which one and change it over for you.

CD: Dad, who told you that? They were the mine inspectors?

JM: Oh yes, the mine inspectors come in and they'd help you out. Some of the mine inspectors were pretty good. Instead of criticizing you, they'd help you. And that was the biggest gain that I had, the mine inspectors that came in to tell you just how to do it. I learned more by being taught by the mine inspectors that knew rather than those that bragged. There were a lot of those men that came in. There were inspectors whose bigness was bigger than their body. And it was hard to learn because I couldn't understand English.

LB: That would be tough, all right.

JM: Changing words and stuff, it was very tough. I memorized everything they said and that way I got by pretty good. But as far as being a genius at any of that, I never was.

LB: Do you have any really fond memories of your time in the mine? Things that you really liked?

JM: Well, not necessarily. What memories I have are of my dad coming and showing me how to do things. My dad would show you and then you'd abide by that. Like the coal, he said that you look at it, if it's heavy then it's rock. If it's light it's coal. He taught me the difference between one and the other, which was a very hard set up to change. I'd never been around coal or rock and it was hard to distinguish between one and the other. I managed, slow but sure, to learn which was coal and which was rock.³

³ John's granddaughter, Paula Dupin-Zahn, reviewed the draft transcript at John's request. She noted that John could tell the difference in coal and where it came from. One time she brought him a piece of coal and when he looked at

LB: Did you have any really scary times?

JM: Oh, I was always scared in the mine. Especially at the face, always scared that a chunk could fall out. It got so it didn't bother me anymore. I'd abide by the way the coal fell. You learn how the coal falls, how it measures itself and the rock and the coal. Once I learned the difference, it was an easy thing.

CD: Every Sunday you would have to go up to the mine and check the fan so the ventilation was ok when the miners came. Do you remember the one day you went to the mine... [interrupted by John].

JM: No, I don't. I'd go up early in the morning to check the mine, to make sure it was right.

CD: But you got scared because you saw some eyes behind the fan. You thought it was your dog. What was it?

JM: I don't remember what it was.

CD: It was a Mountain Lion.

JM: Oh, that. There was an animal out there and I didn't know what it was. Then I learned it was a Mountain Lion. But the Mountain Lion went away, but it scared the hell out of me! Not knowing what it was, you know. I was not familiar with wild animals, I didn't know what to do. I was more scared than it, but it never bothered me. I was always ready. Wild animals would walk away from you all the time. They never bothered you. If a wild animal came there, they'd walk away. I never had trouble with animals.

LB: Do you remember any of the men that you worked with at the mine? Who worked with you?

JM: Oh, a lot of them. I can't remember their names. Very few men worked there.

LB: Mostly your family?

JM: Mostly the family, yes, especially my brothers and my father. I learned more from my father than I did from many. There'd be a stranger there, maybe give you an idea how to do it, but it was never equal to what my dad was teaching me. I learned more from him about how to handle coal and stuff. He was proud, coming off of a farm where you had nothing but rock.

LB: What were the names of your brothers?

it he told her it came from Emery County and he knew which coal seam it came from. Paula observed that he was self-taught and very smart.

JM: My brother Joe was the youngest, and Clem was just below me, then me, just the three of us. Clem was in the middle, I was the oldest brother, Clem was second, and Joe was the third.

CD: And your sister was?

JM: My sister was the last one. She was just a girl, a young girl.

CD: What was her name?

JM: Aurelia.

CD: And she was the accountant, did the books.

JM: Yes. She never took very much care of the animals. She learned how to talk to us and tell us that's an animal, this and that. I learned the names of the animals but it took years to learn everything. There'd be a cow and it was just a cow, you didn't know if it was a bull or what tell you learned.⁴

CD: You didn't have any animals at the mine, just a dog. A Doberman.

JM: Yes. Dad built everything.

CD: You had a Doberman at the mine, and the mine was known for the Doberman.

JM: What I built, I did what my dad wanted. All I done was the welding, cutting, and the shaping of the thing. Then dad would tell me how to put it together, but my father was more of an instructor. Well, he was a good instructor, he'd tell me how to do those things. And then he taught me how to take care of coal when its at the face and when it was drilled, drilling the coal and stuff. But I didn't do much of that. They had men to do that work.

LB: Where did your dad sell the coal?

JM: I don't know. I don't remember where they started.

CD: Where did they sell the coal?

JM: When they started the mine.

CD: We don't know where they sold the coal.

⁴ According to Paula Dupin-Zahn, John's comments about the animals refer to the family's time on a farm in Idaho. The US census record for 1920 places the Andrew Marinoni family at Lava Hot Springs, Bannock County, ID where Andrew worked as a stonemason. In the 1930 census the family was at Arimo, Bannock County, ID where Andrew was farming. In a 2012 interview with John and his sister Aurelia for *Intermountain Catholic*, they reported that the family lost the farm during the Great Depression.

JM: When the mine first opened, it was a couple of fellows had it. I don't even know their names.

LB: William Shield

JM: Shields used to own the mine. He sold it to my dad for practically nothing. Dad built everything, the blocks for ventilation. Dad was a good stonemason, he took good care of the ventilation. He could build the stone walls and everything. He was very good at the ventilation. He knew ventilation better than most of the guys that worked around there.

LB: Where did your dad learn all of this?

JM: Well, he was a mason. He learned it under this grandfather, a stonemason. I couldn't tell you [where he learned mining] because I had a hard time learning what he learned.

LB: I hear you had some dogs up at the mine.

JM: We did.

LB: What kind of dogs?

JM: Oh, God, don't ask me. Any kind.

CD: They were Dobermans.

JM: The best dog that we had was a Doberman. He was more of a watchdog than anything else.

CD: And he was a really nice dog.

JM: Oh, very fine. Obedient. He got so we could send him to get a cow turned around and different things. Dog was well trained.

CD: As long as the dog was with you, he was good. But as soon as we closed the gate!

JM: Oh yes. A lot of that stuff I don't remember.

CD: What did he do to the one safety inspector that had a cane?

JM: Oh. The inspector hated the dog. He'd take his cane and try to scare the dog. Well, the dog one day grabbed the cane and took it away from him. It scared the inspector. We didn't have much trouble after that. We called him [the dog] Bruno and we said, "Come here, Bruno" and he'd come and leave everything alone. The dogs were obedient. As soon as the inspectors learned how to talk to them there was no trouble. They were bitter with the dogs and the dogs didn't like that, so the dogs didn't like them either [laughter]. Very little trouble with the dogs, all we had to do was call them and everything was all right. No problem.

LB: You sold the mine, is that right?

JM: Don't even ask me what happened. I never had much to do with it.

CD: You sold the mine.

JM: Dad sold the [interrupted by Charlene]

CD: No, no. You bought the mine from your dad.

JM: Yes. Dad bought the mine from this guy and when the guys got through with it, Dad bought the mine.⁵

CD: In 1957 you bought the mine, you and your brothers and sister bought the mine from your dad.

JM: Yes, we bought it and worked it.⁶

CD: And then when you sold it in 1974, who did you sell it to?

JM: God, don't ask me! So many guys.

CD: Portland Cement

JM: The company was Portland Cement, but the man who really bought it was an engineer. But I can't remember his name.

LB: What did you do after you weren't mining anymore?

JM: I was a welder and designer. I done all of that. I had done welding on the ships and one thing and another. So I got a job as a welder on the ships, that's how I got hurt.

CD: When you retired, after you sold the mine, didn't you start making all these tables and chairs for everybody?

JM: When I retired I'd buy all this second hand iron and make all these tools and stuff. See this here? [points to a table he crafted] I made that, I made a lot of them. In fact, I made them and if

⁵ The Soldier Creek Mine is located in section 18, T13S R12E SLM, in the Book Cliffs coal field. The General Land Office plat (1904) of this section shows Mary Marlison's home and two adits on her coal claim on the east side of Soldier Creek; no mine is shown on the west side of the creek where the Soldier Creek Mine was later opened. William Shields, the apparent pioneer of the Soldier Creek Mine, or his heirs sold the mine to Andrew Marinoni in 1945.

⁶ A 1965 directory of Utah's mining industry indicates that after John and his siblings purchased the mine from their father, they renamed it Premium Coal Company with a mailing address at Price, UT.

I wanted to give them for a present I'd give them for a present. I made a lot and lost money every time I made one because I never asked for money.⁷

CD: Dad, you went and helped your best friend? Who was that? You went and helped Bert Pritchard after you retired. Didn't you go out and help him?

JM: Bert, Bert, yes. Bert Pritchard, yes, I went to work. I just helped him.

CD: And when you were there, did you invent a machine? Can you tell them about the machine you invented?

JM: I don't even remember.

CD: It was to take the copper out of the

JM: Hell, if you ask me its all Greek [laughter]. I don't try to remember everything!

CD: He invented this machine that took the copper out of wiring.

JM: It did it by heat, by burning. Throw it in the fire and burn it and melt it and all the copper would come out. I didn't do much of that, I did some but not that much.

CD: Why didn't you patent that?

JM: It cost money! And I didn't have it.

LB: What kind of wages did you get when you worked in the mine?

JM: It depended on what you was doing. Sometimes when I worked there it was a regular \$3.50 a day, something like that. There was nothing to brag about. You wouldn't get rich working in the mine. You had to do a lot of work.

CD: Who got paid first?

JM: Huh?

CD: Your workers got paid first, then you got what was left.

JM: Yes. Most of them you'd pay what you thought. I never did worry because I had to work and they'd give me what I was satisfied.

LB: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your coal mining experience?

⁷ Paula Dupin-Zahn observed, "We call his inventions Bullet Proof Furniture. Very well made and sturdy, will last for generations!"

JM: Well, don't be afraid of doing things and listen to the guys that know it. Work with fellows that works with it, you won't get hurt. If you got a good group of miners, you're safe. The supervisor will help you all the time. If you think you know more than the supervisor, you're in danger. You got to listen to the supervisor, how to do those things. If you're a good listener, you're a good learner. Ninety percent of the bosses, biggest share of the bosses, are real good men, but some of them they think that they know more than anybody. They make a monkey out of you, saying "Can't you do this? Can't you do that?" And yet they didn't know how to do it themselves, many of them. Find a lot of bosses that way.

LB: If you had to do it over, would you do it again?

JM: Well, knowing what I do now, sure I'd do it. Glad to. I'd teach them instead of them trying to teach me. The best thing to do is listen and do it like they say. Listen to how they do it, and everything is good.

CD: This was a family mine, it was run by the family.

JM: Yes.

CD: What was this mine called?

JM: God, I don't know.

CD: What did they call it? They called it the Marinoni Mine.

JM: No. Yes, the Marinoni Mine. You're right.

CD: You and your brothers had a nickname. What did they call you?

JM: I don't know. Hell, I don't remember all that stuff.

CD: They called you the Coal Mining Twins

JM: Oh, yes. The coal miners that teach us, hell, that's all under the wind. Never even thought of that. You learn something then you can't [interrupted by Charlene]

CD: But did you and your brothers let your family, your kids, work in the mine?

JM: We'd hire people, too.

CD: Did you hire your own kids?

JM: Yes.

CD: No. You did not. You said we had to do better.

JM: We would teach the kids. There were brothers [interrupted by Charlene].

CD: No, us. Your children.

JM: Oh. They all learned.

CD: But they couldn't work in the mine.

JM: No, they didn't.

CD: You said education was more important.

JM: Yes. I'd rather them go learn something else than work in the mine. I'd rather see them go to school two years than one day in a mine [laughter].

LB: Well, John, thank you very much. It's been great to talk with you.

JM: You know, you can't really write a story unless you sit down and check all memories. Ninety percent of the memories are gone. I used to do it this way, well the memory is not there no more. And you done it as you learned how to do it. Coal mining is a use of a good head. Do it the easy way, don't think that you know it all. Learn to do it and do it right. Lots of miners go in there and because they're miners they learned it all. Those are the guys, most of the guys, that get hurt are experienced miners and think they know it all, and then they slip. You can never learn all of it. You've got to learn as you go along with it, and listen to your boss. My father was a good boss. When he taught you, you learned. Very seldom get hurt the way my dad taught. You don't know how things happen without knowing. Just like you go along with a car and you hit another car, did you do it on purpose? You follow what I'm getting at?

LB: I do.

JM: And that's the way it is in the coal mine.

CD: How many came to the mine to make a purchase or make a deal with you? Everything was done in the scale house. Over what? Your mother would cook a meal, what would you drink?

JM: Wine!

CD: You'd have a glass of wine.

JM: Wine was always, not plentiful, but it was, we used a lot. Not to get drunk, just with dinner; it was used as water. But as far as drinking wine to get drunk, it was no. It was used as water. Dad would say "Don't drink the wine, just taste it." Even today I like a little wine with my meal. Not a lot. I can never see a man drink a lot of wine.

CD: But everybody got a glass of wine that came to the mine.

JM: Everybody. Not just to get drunk on. They used it because it was practical. They learned how to use it, wouldn't drink it just to be drinking it. They'd use it as water, stuff like that.

LB: So your mom cooked lunches for you, did she?

JM: Oh yes. My mother and the girls, the two girls, all of them. Don't ask me.

CD: Well, we all grew up at the mine.

JM: They'd all help each other. Mother and child, the laundry. The kids would hang it out. They all worked together. We got along good. We didn't have much trouble. Not as far as among the family and stuff. I don't remember all of it. I went to work for the government, gave up the mining and went work for the government.

CD: That was before. You went during World War II. You went up and welded on war ships in Bremerton, Washington.

JM: Yes, I went to work for the government as a welder.

CD: And then your dad asked you to come home after the war and help in the mine.

JM: Yes. Dad took the mine over. The lawyers took it away. Don't ask me how, but that's what happened. The lawyers got, own it.

CD: That's all right. You're ok.⁸ You did good.

LB: I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. It's been interesting.

JM: Well, it's not as legally as I'd like to express it. You can't express out of the past, because you might slip a little. Like moving this thing right here [his walker], I can push it anywhere you want it, but if I miss a cog it don't go the right way. That's the way it is. But I'm satisfied the way everything went, and especially that guy listening [reference to videographer Jim Mattingly]. He listens; he never said a word. Silence is golden!

LB: I'll make sure that doesn't go to his head [laughter].

JM: That's why he's there. He listens to us, bet he could repeat 90% of what we said. Just by listening. He never said a word.

⁸ John's reference to lawyers is unclear. His daughter, Charlene Dupin, indicates that she is not sure why John is agitated about lawyers, and she soothes him.

LB: You were a good listener, weren't you?

JM: How do you think you learn? Did you know that I didn't even know my own name when I went to school? I was nothing but a damned dirty Dago. We fought. Well, the insult turns into use of a fist. I defended myself pretty good. Then I got along with a lot of people. But to others we were nothing but assholes, I'm not ashamed to admit to it. They didn't think much of you, you know. Dirty Dagos and all that. But we got along and some of them who were so bitter against us turned out to be our best friends. I got along good after, when I went to work for the government I was good. I went to work as a welder.

CD: What's your real name? When you came to the United States.

JM: Giovanni. Giovanni. Italian name.

CD: You did very good. For somebody who said you don't know anything, you did very good, Dad!⁹

⁹ In June 2013, Paula Dupin-Zahn observed that 10 years ago John would have been able to tell more about his mining, "but age has taken some of his memory." She said, "He was a very brilliant man whose mind was always thinking of ways to improve any process. He was self-taught and very practical in work."