

VERNELL ROWLEY
Oral History Interview

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

April 2, 2014

My name is Lee Bennett and we're here in Huntington, Utah this morning to interview Vernell Rowley for the Utah mining history project. Jim Mattingly is here to record the interview.

LB: Give us your name and your date of birth.

VR: My name is Neal Vernell Rowley. I was born December the 7th, 1934 in Huntington, Utah.

LB: Ok. Same town where you're living now.

VR: Same town where I'm living now, same block.

LB: Have you lived someplace else?

VR: No. I've lived right here all my life.

LB: How did you get involved with mining in Utah?

VR: My great granddad developed a mine in Mohrland to start with.¹ My dad worked at Hiawatha, so I got a job at Hiawatha also.

LB: And Hiawatha is a coalmine?

VR: Hiawatha was a coalmine.²

LB: How old were you when you started?

¹ In 1896 the Grange brothers, Samuel, Ulysses, and Ernest, and a partner acquired ownership of a coal mine originally discovered by William and Erin Howard; the Grange brothers ran this mine until about 1908. William Howard opened a second coal mine in the same area of Cedar Creek Canyon. Each mine was a "wagon mine," so called because the coal seam was so thick that locals could drive their horse and wagon into the mine and load directly from the face (Edward A. Geary, A History of Emery County, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 208).

² The Hiawatha mine is located in the Middle fork of Miller Creek Canyon in Carbon County, and was developed by the Consolidated Fuel Company between 1908-1909 (Edward A. Geary, A History of Emery County, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 209).

VR: Twenty-one [1955]

LB: So mining was a kind of a family tradition for you.

VR: Coal mining was a family tradition.

LB: Did it predate your great grandfather?

VR: No. He opened up one of the first mines in Emery County. That was the Mohrland Mine.³

LB: When you started mining did you have a family already?

VR: No, I just got married.

LB: What was it like when you went to work? You kind of knew about it [coal mining] because it had been in the family. Had you worked with your dad in the mine, or how did you actually get hired?

VR: I just got hired. My dad was working there and I guess they decided they'd let me have a job with them, too. But I never did work with him. I worked in different sections than he worked in.

LB: Where did you go to work first in the mine?

VR: I was a shuttle car driver, then I went to a motorman, then I was a mason. And then I retired.

LB: Tell me what a shuttle car driver does.

VR: Hauls coal from the Joy loader to the beltline or track, wherever they dumped the coal. Most generally it was the beltline. Then they transferred it from the beltline to outside.

LB: Were they using machines to do the mining or were they drilling?

VR: They were drilling, shooting, and using the Joy loader to load it, and a shuttle car to haul it. Beltlines transferred it from the section to the outside.

³ Mohrland was named by using the first letter of the last name of each of the men who formed the Castle Valley Fuel Company: Mays, Orem, Heiner, and Rice. The name is pronounced Moreland and the company hired Erin Howard as general foreman; shipments began in 1910 (Edward A. Geary, A History of Emery County, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 208-209). After acquiring several coal mines, the Castle Valley Fuel Company was bought by U.S. Fuel Company (Max Finley, A Brief History of Mohrland, A Coal Mining Town, typewritten manuscript, n.d.; copy provided by Vernell Rowley).

LB: You said you drove a motor.

VR: Well, it was an electric locomotive.

LB: Ok, and what did it do?

VR: It hauled coal out and hauled supplies in. Timber, rock dust, and whatever they needed inside the section it hauled it inside the mine.

LB: The locomotive was on a track then?

VR: Yes, on a track, a narrow-gauge track.

LB: How did you learn how to drive a shuttle car? Did they just stick you in the seat and say, "do it?"

VR: Yes. Came naturally, just like driving a pickup truck.

LB: What about the locomotive?

VR: Well, it was a little bit different. I don't remember of ever having any trouble getting used to it. I had a couple of run-aways with it. If you had slick rails and unless you had good sand and a good sander why sometimes it was pretty hard to stop them.

LB: What happens if you couldn't get it stopped?

VR: You crashed.

LB: Did that ever happen to you?

VR: No. Never did. It happened to quite a few of the other guys I know, but it never happened to me.

LB: What would make the rails slick?

VR: Just use and not enough sand on it. Sometimes they'd get wet. Just like your railroad rails are today.

LB: Were there signals that you had to let somebody know that you were having trouble?

VR: They had a dispatcher outside and you generally talked to him. Once in a while he'd call you and tell you which section to go get the coal in. He'd call you up and tell you what section needed timbers or stuff like that. So you kept in touch with the dispatcher on the outside.

LB: So inside the mine there were switches that would route you from one set of tracks to the next.

VR: Right.

LB: Did you have to set those switches yourself?

VR: They generally had a cord that you pulled if you wanted to go one way or another. Lot of times you had a nipper, a fellow called a nipper. He'd jump off and throw the switches when you were backing up or something, disconnect the car, hooked on the empties to bring them back in. There were generally two of you [on the locomotive], Motorman and Nipper they called it.

LB: And you'd do that for an 8-hour shift?

VR: For an 8-hour shift.

LB: How far into the mine were you?

VR: I don't know exactly how far it would be in there. They claim that at one time Hiawatha had 21 miles of track that took them from the South Fork portal to the tippel.

LB: Did you travel on all those tracks?

VR: No. I just had a certain areas that I traveled on.

LB: How big a load of would you haul when you were hauling the coal?

VR: You'd probably have, maybe, ten mine cars at, I don't know, 7-8 tons to the car.

LB: Did you have to load it or was there an automatic loader?

VR: No, it was loaded through a little, I don't know what you'd call it [loader head]. They'd dump onto a conveyor, and the conveyor would go up there and they'd get one car then they'd throw a light on you and you'd pull up. When they'd shut the light out, then you'd stop and they'd load that car. Keep up until they got the cars loaded.

LB: You had a string of how many cars?

VR: Ten, but it all depended. Sometimes there were 10 or 12.

LB: Once you were loaded, how long did it take to go from that to where you were bound?

VR: Oh, maybe 10 minutes, 15-20, I don't know.

LB: How did the cars empty?

VR: You didn't empty them. They took them to the tipple and the tipple emptied them.

LB: It would actually grab the car?

VR: No. What you'd do, you'd load these ten, you'd take them down and put them on the parting. Then the mainline motorman would come and get them, however many they wanted, 15, 20, whatever. And then they'd take them out to the hoist then the hoist would drop them down to the tipple. The tipple would unload them, and bring them back up empty. The mainline motorman would put them up and put them in the different sections where you'd go to get them and load them, and put them back in the section; the mainline motorman would come and pick them up again.

LB: How big an area on the working face of the mine did it take to make the coal that you moved in the locomotive? Were you long-walling at that time or using a continuous miner?

VR: No, it was all drill and cut machines and Joy loader. I think the entries were probably about 20 feet wide and however tall that coal was. Maybe eight feet, some would be ten feet. Some places in Hiawatha they claim the face was 20 feet high with coal, but I don't remember them being much over eight or ten feet in the sections that I worked in.

LB: You mentioned that you had one more thing that you did, masonry. Tell me about that.

VR: That was putting up stoppings. When they'd go past there you'd put up stoppings to keep the fresh air going into the face all the time.

LB: Had you ever done masonry work before?

VR: No. It looked like a pretty good job and I wanted a change so I bid on it. You bid on these jobs as they came up and if you had seniority you'd generally get the job. Whoever had the most seniority would get the job. Started out as a shuttle car driver, then I got bored with that so I decided I wanted a change and I decided I'd try the motorman. That went on for a few years then I decided I wanted another change so I went to mason.

LB: Where each of those changes an increase in pay?

VR: No. Oh, they might have been. It was all about the same pay.

LB: And you commuted to the mine from here in town? You just drove your pickup truck.

VR: Yes, we carpooled from here to Hiawatha bathhouse.

LB: Tell me how you could see what you were doing underground. What was the lighting like?

VR: You had a mine light. If it ever went out, why, you were in big trouble because that was the darkest hole you were ever in. You'd never see anything.

LB: Did that ever happen to you?

VR: No.

LB: Were these battery-operated headlights?

VR: They were battery-operated lights. You'd check them out at the lamp house, they'd last 8-10 hours, then you'd check them back in. They'd recharge them and the next day you'd get it and away you'd go again.

LB: How did the mine know that you got out ok at the end of your shift?

VR: You had a tag on your mine belt that was generally the same tag that was on your light. Same number as on the light. I think mine was 312, something like that. I had one of the tags on my belt and one on my light. So you'd check the light out and check it back in.

LB: Did they provide you with training on being safe underground?

VR: Yes, you had a lot of training sessions. First-aid training, mine safety, training on which routes to come in and out of if you got in trouble in the section, how to get out the return to safety. We were pretty well trained.

LB: Who was operating Hiawatha at that time?

VR: U.S. Fuel Company⁴

LB: Did you ever have any bad experiences when you worked at Hiawatha?

VR: No. I saw where a lot of cave-ins had been, but I never was involved in any of them. I lucked out pretty good!

LB: Did you like mining?

⁴ U.S. Fuel Company was organized in 1915 as a subsidiary of the U.S. Smelting, Refining, and Mining Company who had acquired the Mohrland and Hiawatha mines and the railroad lines that served them (Edward A. Geary, *A History of Emery County*, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 211). In the 1920s the Mohrland and King mines were combined and renamed King No. 1, and the Black Hawk mine renamed the King No. 2; the Hiawatha mine was also King No. 2 (United States Fuel Company viewed at UtahRails.net on April 10, 2014). Records for U.S. Fuel Company Hiawatha Mine are housed at the Utah State History center in MSS B 1090, Box 01.

VR: I enjoyed it. I don't think I'd want to go back to it now, I don't think I could take one of those long-wall sections. Being brought up in the area that I was brought up, the time-zone [era] and everything, why I quite enjoyed it. Yes, I really enjoyed it.

LB: What did you like about it?

VR: Oh, just the camaraderie of the miners. I could go to work at 8 o'clock and get off at 4 when I was on day shift. When I was on afternoon shift I'd go to work at 4 o'clock and get off at 12. It was a nice routine. I had plenty of time to do all sorts of other things. I knew when I was supposed to start and when I was supposed to quit, knew what days I was going to get off. Worked five days a week. If you worked Saturdays you got time and a half, but you very seldom ever had to work a Saturday.

LB: How many people were underground on a shift?

VR: Well, I don't know for sure. It depended on what section you were in. There were generally two shuttle car drivers, a motorman, a driller, shot-firer, cutting machine operator and his helper, Joy loader operator and their helper. That was generally the section. They had trackmen, electricians, mechanics, and others. Generally there was a mechanic in each section. The electrician took in 4-5 sections a shift; there were generally only 2 or 3 of them [electricians]. It all depended on where you were and what you were doing.⁵

LB: Can you describe what the guys were actually doing on the working face?

VR: Well, they had regular drills. Generally the driller and shot-firer would work together, they'd drill holes and load them with powder and shoot them. The cutting machine would cut underneath there so the coal would fall down. He generally operated the machine and he had a helper to keep the dust shoveled away to keep him from plugging up. When they got it shot down then your Joy operator helper would make sure the coal was pulled down off the face, keep things from falling on the operator. Two shuttle car drivers would take the coal down to the loader head and put it on the conveyor belt to load the mine cars. Sometimes they had a person running the loader head, depending on how much of a hurry they were in. Sometimes the shuttle car driver ran the loader head by himself. They'd put it into the mine cars. The motorman and nipper would bring the loaded mine cars down and put them on the parting, then the mainline motorman and his nipper would come and get them and take them to the hoist house. The hoist house would drop them to the tipple, and they'd process it from there.

LB: Do you know where the Hiawatha coal went? Who bought it?

VR: No. They sold some of it to Japan; they sold some of it to different power plants. Domestic places used it for domestic. There wasn't very much natural gas around at that time. Most people depended on coal to heat their homes.

⁵ During the mid-1940s the Hiawatha produced 4,000 tons of coal each day and employed 410 people (United States Fuel Company viewed at UtahRails.net on April 10, 2014). Data for the time of Mr. Rowley's employment were not located.

LB: Hiawatha had been established for quite a while when you went to work for them. It was not a brand-new mine.

VR: No, it had been going. I think they said Hiawatha lasted for something like 75 years, from the time it started until the time it shut down. So it produced a lot of coal and benefitted a lot of people, permanent employment and such.

LB: What changes did you see in Huntington during the time you were working in the coal mine?

VR: Well, not really too awful much change. When the power plants came in in the 1970s, then the changes started. Before that it was a regular little ole community. I didn't notice any changes but there probably were some; they went by and I never noticed.

LB: When you had time off, what did you do for recreation? Did you spend it with the fellows you were mining with?

VR: A lot of time I spent with my mining partners. We'd go hunting and fishing, take bumming trips on the desert, explore stuff. Sometimes we did a little trapping. It was kind of like one great big family: all run around together, do different things together.

LB: Most of them live in Huntington also?

VR: No, a lot of them lived in Hiawatha, a lot lived in Carbon County over in Price. We'd generally get together someplace and go do something.

LB: Were you single the whole time that you were coal mining?

VR: Oh no. I was married. I got married in 1955. So I've been a husband and a coal miner.

LB: Did that change your outlook on coal mining in any way?

VR: No. I don't see how it would. I mean that was the only occupation there was around here. You were either a coal miner or a farmer. One or the other.

LB: And farming didn't appeal to you?

VR: No. My dad loved it, but my living came out of the coal mine.

LB: How long did you coal mine?

VR: Oh, 22 or 23 years, somewhere along in there [1955 to 1977 or 1978]. I retired out of Hiawatha. They shut down in 1992 and, well, I retired.

LB: Do you remember what your starting wage was when you went to work as a shuttle car driver?

VR: Probably \$3 an hour.

LB: What was it when you finished up?

VR: Probably \$15, I don't remember exactly. It was quite a difference in there.

LB: Pretty decent living, though, for this area.

VR: It was. Three dollars an hour when I first went to work was pretty good money. You worked for the city or something like that, you were only getting a dollar an hour.

LB: Was Hiawatha a union mine?

VR: Yes, a union mine.

LB: Were you active in the union?

VR: I was. Well, I don't know that it was really active, but then I belonged to the union.

LB: Did you ever run for office?

VR: Right now I'm Recording Secretary for Local 6363 from Hiawatha. And there's only about 60 of us left, rest of them have all died off.⁶

LB: Looking back on it, you said you'd go do it again if you could.

VR: I'd like to go back in the way it was but I don't want to go in the way they're mining coal now. Long-walls would be kind of treacherous. They tell me they have to wear football helmets and football shoulder pads and what not. You get coal thrown at you all the time the way they're mining coal now. I never experienced it, but the stories I've heard from those mining now just give me the impression that I don't think I'd want to start over again in a coal mine. Well, I know I wouldn't right now because I think there's only one union mine left in the State of Utah; the others have gone non-union.

LB: Which one is the union mine?

VR: Deer Creek up here. So I don't think you'd have any job security. I don't think you'd have any benefits. I think it would be a nightmare to work in a coal mine now.⁷

⁶ The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) Local 6363 maintains an office in Cleveland, Utah and reports it had 69 members in 2012 (UnionFacts.com viewed on April 10, 2014).

⁷ Upon review of the transcript, Vernell commented that the Deer Creek mine was operating at a reduced level and appeared to be moving toward a close-down.

LB: So being a union member was good for you?

VR: Yes, it was real good for me. You betcha.

LB: Did any of your kids end up being miners?

VR: No, they all moved, went north.

LB: Did you ever to into your grandpa's mine, the Mohrland?

VR: Yes.

LB: What was it like?

VR: Well, Mohrland and Hiawatha kind of intersected.⁸ When they shut Mohrland down, Mohrland belonged to U.S. Fuel Company, then they drilled in from there [through the Hiawatha]. What coal was left in Mohrland, Hiawatha mined it.⁹ They went out the South Fork route of the Hiawatha portal, down the tram and down to the tipple. They moved all the equipment, tipple, and everything out of the Mohrland, when they shut it down. But my grandfather and his relation, brothers and whatnot, owned that mine. They sold it to U.S. Fuel Company. It was still a horse mine when they had it, so U.S Fuel Company, when they took over, developed it and put the equipment in there and tipple in.

LB: Hiawatha didn't have the horse and buggy thing going when you were there?

VR: No. It was all motor equipment.¹⁰

LB: You mentioned a piece of equipment you called a Joy loader. Can you describe that for me?

VR: Well it had a conveyor belt on it, and it had two arms out there [front]. It would go into the coal and scrape the coal in to it and up over the thing and into the shuttle car.¹¹

⁸ The Hiawatha is a complex comprised of several older mines: King, Hiawatha, Black Hawk, and Mohrland (Permit C0070011, Utah Coal Program, viewed on April 18, 2014 at <http://linux1.ogm.utah.gov/WebStuff/wwwroot/coal/minedetail.php?C0070011>).

⁹ The Mohrland mine was closed in 1938 and the buildings from the town of the same name were sold for salvage and removed. The Hiawatha location was more spacious and its facilities newer and larger (Edward A. Geary, *A History of Emery County*, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 296).

¹⁰ U.S. Fuel Company began to fully mechanize its mining operations in 1930. In 1944 they added rubber-tired shuttle cars but retained the electric locomotives to move the coal out of the mine (United States Fuel Company viewed at UtahRails.net on April 10, 2014).

¹¹ The Joy loader was designed by Joseph Joy and first produced in 1920, followed by several improved models (Joy Manufacturing Company, "Joseph Francis Joy," brochure, n.d.). Today there is a Joy

LB: And it was operated by a driver?

VR: By a loader operator. He had a helper there who watched his cables so he didn't run over the cables. Kept an eye on things, if it looked like an overhang he'd warn the operator. They'd take bars and whatnot to get the coal down. If a piece [of coal] was too big that it couldn't go on the conveyor belt, he [helper] grabbed a pick and busted it up into pieces that would go into the conveyor.

LB: Was the Hiawatha a wet mine? Was there a lot of dripping water?

VR: In some sections there was an awful lot of water, and in other sections it was pretty dry. Those that I worked in, I only remember once or twice we had to wear parkas to keep dry. The rest of the time it was fairly dry.

LB: Was it warm or cold down underground?

VR: It was fairly warm. The temperature was about the same year-round. I don't recall the temperature, but at the face where the fresh air would come in it might be a little bit chilly. You didn't have to have coats on to work.

LB: So coming out of the mine at the end of your shift to go back to the bathhouse, it might have gotten a little chilly in the wintertime?

VR: Well, not necessarily in the wintertime. But when you got to the outer portal to the bathhouse, you got a little chilly. Riding out the mantrip it wasn't all that bad.

LB: Did the locomotive pull the mantrip? Or was that a separate operation?

VR: Generally the motorman, when he was through with pulling coal from the section, he hook up a car and brought you out. They'd use that same motor for graveyard to bring material into the mine. When someone needed to run into the mine they generally had a spare motor outside that they'd use; a mechanic had to come in to do some work he'd generally jump on the motor that was outside. Now they tell me it is all trucks. They have scrubbers on a truck so you can run a truck in the mine to deliver timber or whatever they want. They didn't have that in Hiawatha when I was there. In fact, it would not have been allowed. They didn't allow you to have diesel or gas operated equipment inside the mine.

LB: It was all electric?

VR: It was all electric.

warehouse and shop located in Wellington, Utah. Company records are archived at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, DE.

LB: Did you ever run over your own cable?

VR: No. They had reels on them, the shuttle cars, when you went out to the loader head you'd wind your cable up and when you went in it pulled out. It was right there in front of you where you could watch it. Sometimes you'd blow a cable from dragging it around. It would wear out and come apart, sometimes it would short out. You'd have to get the mechanic to come splice it, then go on about your business.

LB: How did you communicate if you needed a mechanic or the dispatcher needed you?

VR: They had phones in there. Every loader head had a phone on it. You could call outside.

LB: How did you feel about them poking a hole in the Mohrland and changing it to a more modern kind of mine?

VR: Well, that was all done before my time. The only time I really went into the Mohrland Mine when I was working at Hiawatha, was when I went in there to put up a cinderblock wall that had caved in. They changed the air and I went in there to rebuild it. That was about the only time I went into the Mohrland Mine.

LB: When you were working as a mason how did you get your cinderblocks and all that stuff in?

VR: They'd bring it in on the motor, on the material train and stack it up. You'd load it into the shuttle car and take it where you wanted it.

LB: Who taught you how to do that, do the masonry?

VR: Just watching people do it. Decided it looked like a pretty interesting job to me.

LB: Tell me a little bit about why you put walls in some places and took walls down in other places. I know it had to do with air circulation.

VR: That's what it was. You'd drive these sections in there, cross sections. You had your return and your fresh air. So we put these cinderblock walls up so that the fresh air would go up to the face and go back the return. The fan would suck it on the outside. So when you began to retrieve, pull pillars, then you'd knock this wall out so the air would go this way; you'd work your way back, knocking walls out. As long as you were advancing you were building walls. You always wanted that fresh air flowing to the face, wherever the Joy loader was working. They didn't want the fresh air to go beyond there and they didn't want it to fall back, always to the face.

LB: Was it up to you to decide where the walls went, or did someone tell you that?

VR: Well, the engineers would tell you to run the sections up there, but you knew where the fresh air was and you ran a straight line of walls all the way. You didn't have to be told, you knew where to put them.

LB: Did you ever run a crew? Just worked by yourself with your helper?

VR: No, not a crew. Just worked with my helper.

LB: Did you have any scary experiences in the mine?

VR: Not really. I think I had it pretty lucky. I never did work in a section that way. I was always in the advance sections. I only remember having to pull pillars once. I remember going in there to a section that had a cave-in to help them retrieve [pull pillars] and that's the only time I was ever in a real dangerous situation. They never lost any man in a cave-in. They hurt a couple but there were no fatalities. No, I think I was pretty lucky.

LB: Let's switch gears for a minute and tell me about the MK Tunnels, what they are and how you got involved with that project.

VR: During the 1950s the government was doing work for the Atomic Energy Commission; they wanted to test the sandstone formations down here to see how they'd hold up under pressure from explosions and such. I was still going to school, so I never got involved in any of it. But after they got through with them, the [Emery County] Historical Society wanted to put up some information [kiosks] down there so they asked different members of the Historical Society if they would do a little research and pick up some histories on them and do some photographs. That's how I got involved with the MK Tunnels.¹² I never worked in any of them, but helped the Historical Society but put the information kiosks.

LB: Do you have any feel for whether the tests that MK did satisfied whatever the Atomic Energy Commission wanted?

VR: It satisfied them. They decided that these formations weren't what they wanted, so they moved their operation to Yucca, Nevada. I think there were 3 or 4 different locations, one near Grand Junction or in Colorado someplace, this one here, and I don't know where the other was. Anyway, they ended up in Yucca, Nevada where the formation satisfied their needs. These down here didn't. They caved in, a couple of them did anyway. One of them is still in real good shape, but there are two of them that caved in. These down here never panned out, the formation wasn't stable enough to hold for the type of explosives they were testing for.

LB: There was uranium mining in the San Rafael Swell but there wasn't any right around here, was there?

¹² The Morrison-Knudson Company, Inc. (MK) began tunneling in 1948 in the Buckhorn Flat area. Crews were housed on-site and at Castle Dale; the work went on for several years. About 320,000 pounds of explosives were detonated underground to test the rock structure (Edward A. Geary, A History of Emery County, Utah State Historical Society and Emery County Commission, 1996, pg 318).

VR: There was some down by the San Rafael River, [and on] Calf Mesa, down in that way. Thirty miles south of here.

LB: Did you ever have any interest in uranium mining?

VR: No, not until I got involved with the Historical Society. We went down and did a little research on them, took some photos and gathered up a few histories. But that was after we got word that Division of Oil, Gas and Mining was talking about closing them. We wanted to get the feel of what they were before they were closed off.

LB: Did the uranium mining in the San Rafael Swell have any economic or social impact on Huntington?

VR: I think it did, I think it had quite a bit. I had some uncles that were in the uranium business, had some claims. They did fairly well. A lot of them [uranium miners], if they made a dollar they put it all back in there [mine] and never got anything out of it anyway. It all depends on who you were. They claim that if you really hit good uranium then the government, the Atomic Energy Commission, would give you a bonus. A lot of people lived off that, bought a new car off of it. Most of the uranium mines that I've explored around didn't go in much more than 25-30 feet. There were just little pockets of uranium; when they got that pocket out it petered out and they abandoned the diggings and went someplace else. In doing research and talking to them, I think most people made their money off the penny stocks. They made more money selling penny stock than they actually did mining the uranium. There were a few exceptions, I guess, probably like the Lucky Strike mines in Red Canyon [San Rafael Swell] and a few of them down around Blanding, Monticello and Moab, and through there. I think these around here were just small pockets of uranium, and when they were mined they shut down. I think that, but I'm not sure of it.¹³

LB: Did the guys that worked in the coal mine quit to go do uranium mining?

VR: No, the coal mine was a lot better occupation than those uranium mines. In fact, I don't know of anybody. All the uranium miners generally quit to jump to the coal mines. That uranium mine, from what I can tell from what research I've been doing, wasn't a very pleasant place to work.

LB: But you said you had some uncles that got into it.

¹³ Uranium mining in the San Rafael Swell first occurred about 1915 in the Temple Mountain vicinity and that area was a focus of WWII explorations for the Manhattan Engineer District. The Lucky Strike mines began production in 1951 and several small operations were noted elsewhere in the Swell. Geologic studies suggested that the "many small deposits scattered throughout the district will probably not have a very large total production" (H.S. Johnson, Uranium Resources of the San Rafael District, Emery County, Utah--A Regional Synthesis, USGS Bulletin 1946-D, 1957, pg. 39-41).

VR: Yes, they staked some claims down around Calf Mesa, down in there. They went back in there quite a little ways, they did pretty good. But they died young, too. I think there's something about that uranium dust that got into their lungs and I don't think they lived much older than 60-70 years old.

LB: People say the same thing about coal dust. What do you think?

VR: No, the coal mine I worked in, Hiawatha, they keep the coal dust pretty well wetted down. They had a sprinkling system in there for the loaders and cutting machines and whatnot. They did a lot of rock dusting. I think they pretty well kept their dust under control. Now the drillers and stuff like that, they probably had a problem with it [coal dust]. Everybody else, I think, was pretty good. Hiawatha was well ventilated. I mean most of their dust up there went out the return. I think that was one of the better mines, the best mines, ever worked in. The only one I ever really worked in.

LB: Did you go visit any of the other coal mines?

VR: Not very often. Go play baseball and basketball with them, every once in a while. That was always on the outside; I never did go on the inside of the mine. The good thing about Hiawatha was that it didn't have any gas. All them mines over around Carbon County right up to Wattis up there, would blow up every once in a while with gas. Hiawatha never had a bit of gas in it that I know of. Wattis, Hiawatha, Mohrland, none of them. I don't think any of the mines along this mountain range ever had any gas in them, unless it was that one down by Emery. It might have had gas in it. But for some reason or another these formations around here were fractured enough that all that natural gas and stuff more or less drained out of these mines up here.

LB: Did Hiawatha use a Fire Boss to go through before the next shift started?

VR: Yes. They pre-inspected before a shift started. They'd have the Fire Boss go in there and re-inspect. On weekends they had Fire Bosses checking for gas and cave-ins, pretty near all the time.

LB: Did you ever have a notion to be a Fire Boss?

VR: Well, I took out Fire Boss papers one time but I never did get involved in it. I was pretty well satisfied with what I was doing.

LB: Can you think of anything else about your coal mining experiences that you'd like to share?

VR: No, I can't think of anything right off.

LB: Switching gears again: You're obviously involved with the historical commission. What interested you about that?

VR: I've always been kind of interested in histories and stuff like that. I got over there and we've been doing a little touring and checking out some of the old coal mines, some of the old ghost towns. Gathering up a few histories here and there. It's just been kind of a fascinating little hobby for me. I enjoyed it, still do.

LB: Has most of your work with the historical commission been in respect to uranium rather than coal?

VR: I can't think of any on that [commission] now was ever in either one of them, either uranium or coal mines. They're generally retired or still teachers, retired from the BLM, or retired from different other jobs. No, I think I'm about the only coal miner that is still active in that group.

LB: Anything that you want to tell us about your explorations out in the San Rafael Swell when you were gathering that historic information?

VR: No, other than we'd just go down on a weekend and bum around. Go inside some of those uranium mines and look things over, take a few pictures. Try to document them as best we could.

LB: How far in could you get?

VR: Oh, the biggest part of them you could go in all the way. They were only in there, I'd say, probably 25-30 feet at the very most. Most of them. There were a few of them that went in there quite a ways further. They weren't in there far enough where it looked like the structure on the inside was a hazard. If an event ever happened on the outside, you could see where rocks and stuff would come down and develop a hazard on the outside. Well I'm not going to say, there's bound to have been some that would be a hazard in a small earthquake or a tremor of some kind. You could get trapped on the inside, but most of them weren't in there that far. Your most danger would be right next to them on the outside where the rock could come down.

LB: You mentioned that there was a camp at the Hiawatha, or the little community of Hiawatha, where some of the miners lived. What was that like? Did you ever go there?

VR: Yes, that's where the bathhouse was. They had three or four different little camps at Hiawatha. They had West Hiawatha. Each nationality had a little section that they'd call theirs. There was the main part of Hiawatha then there was Stringtown, and different sections. They had flattops down at the bottom below the tracks that they used during the war, but after the war the coal dropped off and they tore them down and hauled them off.

LB: Flattops you called them? What are those?

VR: Yes. It was a little community down there made out of cinderblock, that they put in there to accommodate some of the coal miners' families.

LB: What were the ethnic groups that worked at the Hiawatha?

VR: Mostly Greek and Italian.

LB: Did they come out of Huntington or from Price?

VR: Well, most came from Price. Some of them actually came from Greece and Italy. Some of them it was kind of hard to understand what they were telling you. They talked in their native language; they hadn't learned the American language. Most of them were from Price, Helper, and that way. There weren't any ethnic groups that lived in Huntington that I know of. Most came from Price.

LB: Since you worked alone, you didn't really have much opportunity to interact with the different groups did you?

VR: Well, you'd do it after work, yes. They had a lot of parties up at Hiawatha. They had an amusement hall up there, they had a coffee shop, a company store, a Mormon church. If you wanted to stay after work and bum around with them, you're welcome to. Stop and get a pop or a cup of coffee. They had ball games up there. They had a lot of baseball games. A bunch from Huntington went up there and challenged them a time or two in baseball. Sunnyside would come and challenge them. They had a lot of activities, a lot of things going on.

LB: Did you play on one of the teams?

VR: Yes, I was pitch[er] on the Huntington team. Played basketball up there, from Huntington [on the Huntington team]. They'd have movies in that old theater. I never did go, but the ones just before me would chip in \$5 a month, or something like that, go into the pool and you got your doctor services and your amusement, show tickets and so on, came out of that \$5. Yes, they had pretty good times.

LB: Do you miss that kind of thing?

VR: I do. That's the reason that I'm involved with the Historical Society, so I can have something to get active with, bum around with.

LB: Alright. I don't have any more questions so do you have anything else to say?

VR: No, unless you want to take some of that stuff [points to notebooks with photos and information about uranium mines in the San Rafael Swell] and get it copied.

LB: We'll look at that, definitely look at that.

VR: I think the Price district [BLM], I took them [notebooks] over there and they went through it, got some stuff out that they wanted.

LB: This material was from DOGM, or shared with DOGM?

VR: I shared a lot of it with them.