

**Saskatchewan Archives Board, Tape R-325
Excerpts transcribed from interview with Peter Gembey, miner in Bienfait area at
the time of riot, interviewed 18 July 1973 in Bienfait by Larry Johnston and Ron
Adams.**

Interviewer:

Let's say you worked as many days as possible in the month; do you remember how many tons you could get – say, in a day?

Gembey:

Well, it depended on what shape you were in. They used to put two men together, and if they paried them up and they were both healthy gusy and they knew how to shoot that coal, they would put 3500 pounds in that car. They would load that in no time. They had guys with horses that would pull those cards out. Two guys who were healthy could load 14 or 15, even 18 or 20 tons a day; so they made a little. But if you were older, or you had an older partner, they would make only 12 or 13 of those cards; mind you, those cards were about a ton and a half.

Interviewer:

I guess the rates of pay varied, but they paid you about 45 cents a ton?

Gembey:

Yes, it was something like that, but it wasn't actually clear because we had to buy powder, paper to make those cartridges.

Interviewer:

What were squibs?

Gembey:

A squib is made to the same principle as a firecracker, only it was thin and about 6 inches long....When you light it, it give you time to run away from there. When the slow burn gets to the powder like a firecracker, it starts shooting ahead through the hole that leads into the black powder and ignites, and the explosion occurs. There was plenty of smoke.

Interviewer:

I see. And it was difficult to work after you had blown?

Gembey:

At that time they usually just blew at 12 o'clock and 6 o'clock at night. But when you blasted that coal at 12 o'clock, and took an hour for dinner, if there was good ventilation it cleared up pretty good. But in the rooms where the men worked, -- they were just like a tunnel – if the room was far from the head entry where the air was circulating, the smoke would just gradually leak out. The miners had to shovel to get the air moving.

Interviewer:

To circulate the air?

Gembey:

Yes, and then it clears out. But it usually stayed smoky till 2:30 or 3 o'clock.

Interviewer:

You couldn't work?

Gembey:

Well, you worked. You had to work. If you don't work, you don't get paid. Most of the time they had to feel where the coal was. When it was clear you could shovel right into the car; but after dinner you had to carry a shovelful and look for the car.

Interviewer:

You couldn't see where the car was?

Gembey:

That's right. You could load so much and then you would have to go to the main entry where the air was straight, and stay there a few minutes, and then go back again, because – you don't load, you don't get nothing. It used to be in the morning that the miners would make most because they should have blown at 6 o'clock the night before and during the night the smoke would all clear out. They came in the morning and if they could get wagons it would be their biggest half day. But there were other jobs too. If you came in the morning and there were cave-ins on the tracks, by the time you cleared them there would be two or three hours gone. For a while they used to give you an hour at 35 cents for cleaning that up, but later on, when they started getting tough – about 1927 – the miner had to do that for nothing. Form then on they were just pressing harder and harder. The miners had to do something. The only way they could improve themselves was by organizing. It took a long time ... a lot of talking among the miners before they realized they had to have help. Most of them, they were afraid to speak up, because in those years if you mentioned anything about the union, out you go....

Interviewer:

So, you were working on the cutting machine until the spring of 1931. Then you started organizing for the union?

Gembey:

No, we started organizing, like I said, when the bosses began putting pressure on the miners in 1927.

Interviewer:

That early?

Gembey:

Yes, up until then everybody seemed to be satisfied. They worked in the winter and saved up a little money; in the summertime they didn't work so steady, but the storekeepers would give you more than you earned in the summer because they knew you would stay in the winter. But in 1927, and after that, as I said, they started pressing the miners. If the miner came to a place that was caved in, they he cleaned it up for maybe two hours for nothing. Before they made something, but after that they refused to pay them. If miners were unlucky enough to get a workplace that was downhill there would be water there; they would have to carry that water in pails maybe 150 to 200 feet over the hill to dump it. That was for nothing. They didn't get paid for it. You came in the morning and worked for maybe an hour and half carrying that water before you could

start working. During the day the water would start accumulating, so you had to quit loading coal and take the water out.

Interviewer:

Why did they start refusing to pay for the water at that time?

Gembey:

Well, nobody knows. They just refused to pay. Those were just a couple of examples – working conditions – there were bad places where there was no air at all; the miners would complain. They just wouldn't do nothing. And they used to steal from the miners who were loading by ton. They used to steal them blind. One month, it was in October, usually the busiest season, well I was on a cutting machine. There were three cutting machines. Well, in 1928, in October we worked 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, and at the end of the month the company gave us a free dance and a bonus of 5 hours – that's 35 cents an hour – because they loaded the most ever: 39,000 tons. Myself and the other men who worked on the machines, we started comparing our tonnage. We got together, you know, and said: "How many tons did you have last month?" We figured it out and if we got paid for was a little over 18,000 tons. And here they gave us a free dance because they broke the record and loaded 39,000 tons! We didn't get paid for it as machine men; and also the miners. They stole actually half that coal. Everything started accumulating and the miners couldn't take it any more, so they just had to start getting organized. After 1928 the miners eyes were opened quite a bit, because the companies themselves spread the information. We didn't know ourselves how much ... but this month they were bragging that they broke the record. These little things down in the mine and everything like that, forced the miners to do something.

Interviewer:

They were short weighing you up on the scales?

Gembey:

Oh yes, they gave us whatever they felt like giving us, that's all.

Interviewer:

You didn't have a union checkweighman?

Gembey:

A company man. And in the fall of 1929 and the winter of 1930 they cut our wages! The guys that were getting 35 cents an hour, they cut them down to 33 and one third. The fellows that were paid by the ton, they cut them down 5 or 6 cents a ton. So all those things had to be stopped somehow. The only way they could be stopped was by getting a union.

Interviewer:

Now, you organized a union here yourselves around Bienfait, did you not, before the mineworkers union came in? Do you remember what happened to that union? It was very small.

Gembey:

That came after 1931. That was the Bienfait local.

Interviewer:

I was thinking of a little before that. I think it was John Loughran and Bernie Winn who started to organize in the summer of 1931.

Gembey:

That's something I don't know, because the first thing we thought, some of us guys, was how to get in touch with an organizer.....

Interviewer:

So you were looking for a Canadian union?

Gembey:

.... So finally they got in touch with the other one and they got Forkin and Sam Scarlett as organizers.

Interviewer:

Do you remember Joe Forkin at all? What he looked like?

Gembey:

Oh yes, but to describe him...

Interviewer:

It was so long ago.

Gembey:

I can almost see his picture. He was a powerful speaker, both him and Sam Scarlett were good speakers. I can't describe him. He was dark-haired and younger...

Interviewer:

He was about 30 or 31, I think, at the time.

Gembey:

Yes, something like that. So when they started to organize, right away they were called communists too! And troublemakers.

Interviewer:

They didn't admit that they were communists, did they?

Gembey:

They didn't but the mine operators called them that. The rumour spread all over that they were communists too.... To frighten the miners away from them, to intimidate them.... The miners knew that all that was propaganda against the union. So they worked harder amongst themselves, and finally they got organized....

Interviewer:

Do you remember how the strike came about? I know the wages were being cut. Do you remember how you decided to strike? Did you vote?

Gembey:

(Pause) Yes. You see it took us a long time – almost a year and a half before we could get the whole field organized. Actually it started in the fall of 1930, but it was a slow

process. Every miner was scared of losing their jobs, but when wages went down in the winter of 1930-31 the miners really started to take the union cards....

Finally when the miners were 100% organized and got their demands on paper, the bosses thought the whole field was "red" and "troublemakers." Not only a few of us....even the English, and some of them were First War veterans. They were called red too. Just because they were presenting demands to the company. The company refused to have anything to do with them and that's what brought about the strike.

Interviewer:

Charlie Morfit, the man who was the president of the Operators Association, refused to sit at the bargaining table with reds.

Gembey:

Well yes, that's it. That's right. And, as I say, a few of us were laid off in the print of '31 before the strike was called because we were talking openly about the union, and therefore we were red and troublemakers. Some of the rest of them were still working, but finally, when they got all the miners organized, and the committee went with their demands to the company, they were reds too, and troublemakers. Most of the guys on the committee were English speaking.

Interviewer:

On the strike committee? I thought so.

Gembey:

Yes, like Martin Day and the others. There were no ... they called us foreigners....

Interviewer:

...What about the Truax Traer [mine]? Did you unionize the Truax-Traer? Did you have miners down there?

Gembey:

There weren't many miners there; it was modern.

Interviewer:

That was the first strip mine?

Gembey:

There were a few miners, and some of them joined the union, not all of them. Especially the guys that were running the shovels. They were all Americans, anyway. They had a different system there than they have now. There were no trucks to haul the coal; they had cars.

Interviewer:

They laid down tracks?

Gembey:

Yes. So, they had men working there (in the union) but they didn't have them all.

Interviewer:

Do you remember when the Truax-Traer brought in the big power shovel? I think it was 12930. Were you afraid of the shovel?

Gembey:

Well, most miners for a while didn't think it would hurt. When they started producing coal it wasn't clean, and there were rumours that some cars were sent back to them; but when the jobs started to ease up, the miners were frightened.

Interviewer:

How about when the strike was on and Truax-Traer were still able to ship coal? They kept working, didn't they?

Gembey:

Yes, they kept working. They had their own boarding house, some of the men joined the union secretly, but they couldn't very well go out – say 15 men – while others were working; it was useless. They kept working. And when the strike started, that's when they brought a bunch of Mounties in, because they thought the strikers might do some damage to the [steam] shovel [used to strip mine coal at the Truax-Traer mine].

Interviewer:

Why would they think that?

Gembey:

That was beyond anybody's thought at the time. Well, the way they had it the miners were all reds, troublemakers, and liable to do something vicious. And even at the time the parade was to take place in Estevan, most of the businessmen had the idea that they were going to go there and start some kind of revolution. Truax-Traer had the same idea, I guess. They had those Mounties guarding it.