

Strip mining in Bureau County

an Oral History Interview

Irvin Flint, Interviewee
Of Wyanet, Illinois

Interview Date: November 19, 1975

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Narrator's Name: IRVIN FLINT
Tape Number: 1
Date of Interview: NOVEMBER 19, 1975
Place of Interview: WYANET, ILLINOIS
Interviewer's Name: MERLE ROUTT
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: My name is Merle Routt and I'm visiting today, November 19, 1975 with Irvin Flint at Mineral, Illinois. Irvin I ask you to talk to me and tell me a little bit about the strip mines. I think perhaps you should tell me what strip mining is.

A: Well, strip mining amounts to the fact that they come in with big machines and take the topsoil and the rock and everything off from the top of the coal, uncover the vein of coal. Then they come in with a loader, load the coal up, what they have uncovered, about half of what they have uncovered, to haul that to the tipple and process the coal. The next operation, they come back with the machine, the stripper again, and take the topsoil and rock off and put it into the open pit where they have removed the coal.

Q: Oh, I see. All right, now I said that you from Mineral, where did the strip mining start?

A: Well, the strip mining in this area started at Atkinson, Illinois. I don't know at what year really, it was done at that time, they did the stripping with -- when they first started they did their stripping with dozers and tractors and even by horses I think at one time. Stripped the topsoil off.

Q: Did I hear you say that it could have been as far back as 1929?

A: Well, I know the one machine they had at Atkinson, the first stripper they had at Atkinson, was built in 1928. What year they started the stripping, I don't know, but that was when they had the first machine to do the stripping with.

Q: All right then that has moved on towards Mineral and on to Sheffield. Tell me a little bit about the land that they used. They buy up the farms, don't they?

A: They buy up the farms -- there is some land that they did not buy, they just took the coal rights or the land went back to the original owners, very little of that was done. Most of the land they bought and took the coal out and they still own.

Q: Who owns, the coal company?

A: The coal company still owns it.

Q: Now we haven't said anything about the names of the companies. Who was the first company that you can recall?

A: The one that started at Atkinson was Midland Electric Coal Company. Then the first one to start around Mineral was the Pioneer Coal Company. They run for approximately ten years and then they moved out and Midland Coal Company moved from Atkinson up to the Mineral area, and continued their operation there.

Q: Well, does Midland own this, is that the. . .

A: No, at the present time -- in 1960 I believe it was, Midland sold out to Peabody Coal Company. Peabody Coal Company is the present owner.

Q: When did you start with the mines?

A: I started working at the mines in 1959. I had farmed some of their farms around before that, started farming for them in 1958, but I didn't start working in the mines itself until 1959, before I started.

Q: Tell me a little bit about this machine. I've never seen it but I know that it was enormous in size.

A: Well, the first machine they had, the one that was built in 1928, I believe had a twenty yard, a seventeen or twenty yard bucket on it,

A: to strip the coal with. I don't recall just how tall that machine was or what it weighed. But in 1946 when they moved to Mineral they bought a new machine, a 50 yard bucket on that, the bucket was big enough on that machine that you could drive an automobile inside of the bucket. The top end of the boom on that machine was 110 feet from the ground to the top end of the boom.

Q: That's hard to visualize for me. Now tell me about this -- I know there's a lot of lakes formed down there on those farms.

A: Yes, I myself, I have about 2,000 acres leased and of that 2,000 acres there I have approximately fifteen or sixteen lakes that are all stocked with bass, bluegills, bullheads, crappies. Most of them have got carp in them by now, but they weren't stocked with them but they've gotten in there with fellows fishing with minnows and stuff. The lakes run anywheres from oh, probably four or five feet deep to some of them are 35 or 40 feet deep. Some of them are -- well I do have one lake that's better than a half a mile long, probably 150 feet, 200 feet across. A lot of lakes are spring fed from the bottom of the pits and stuff are spring fed so that the water runs out the year around.

Q: They are 30 feet deep, do you mean 30 feet of water?

A: Thirty feet of water.

Q: Then the sides of them go way up in the air?

A: At this one lake, there's 35 feet of water in it, they stripped coal 94 feet. The coal vein would average four to five feet, so it's almost 100 feet of high wall at the far end of the lake and there's 35 feet of water in it.

Q: That's what I was going to ask you, how deep do they have to go into the earth before they get coal, does that vary?

A: Oh yes, that will vary quite a bit. Up there, in one area up there they only went about eight feet for coal. . .

Q: They struck coal?

A: They run anywheres from eight feet to 104 feet at some places.

Q: They have to go down that deep?

A: Down, take that much soil off from the top of the coal to get it.

Q: Then how thick is the vein of coal?

A: It will average four to five feet generally. There's coal even deeper yet than what they have went, that was all the more dirt they could handle with their machine when they quit.

Q: What kind of coal is this?

A: Bituminous coal, it's a soft coal. Lot of sulfur in it, a lot of sulfur content. They can't use it say in steel making or something of that order, because there's too much sulfur in it. Used mostly for power plants, home heating and stuff like that.

Q: How active is that now?

A: Down -- at the present time where we're at -- there's no mining going on at all, they have moved out, they've moved to Victoria, Illinois. They've got two machine there that are -- one is a fifty yard machine and the other is a 70 yard machine. They're running two machines there, they're hauling the coal four or five miles at the present time. They're going to be probably ten or eleven miles away from the tipple from where they're at now. But they're hauling that all on trucks. Where at Atkinson, they had the tipple at Atkinson. Their operation was at Mineral, they hauled the coal on trucks, 30 and 50 ton trucks, they hauled it as much as seven or eight miles and then it would be dumped onto railroad cars and transferred from Mineral to Atkinson where it was processed in the tipple.

Q: Now you can tell how little I know about coal mining, I don't even know what you mean, what do you say tipple? What's that?

A: That is the building where they process the coal. They take it and wash it and clean it, and crush it, size it and everything. That's what the tipple is called.

Q: I've seen the building but I didn't know what it's name was. When they were going strong in that -- now how long have they been away from Mineral area?

A: They moved, ceased their operation there in 1964, they tore the big machine down, the 50 yard machine, they tore that down and moved that to Missouri someplace, in Missouri, the state of Missouri. They tore the loader they had which I believe was a ten yard loader, tore it down and took it to Farmington, Illinois. In 1959 they built a dragline to help pull spoil back, the make more spoil room, they tore that down and shipped that to Farmington, and completely ceased the operation in 1964 at Mineral, Illinois.

Q: When they were working full power how many did they employ?

A: Right off hand I couldn't tell you for sure, but it was in the neighborhood of 100 men.

Q: For how many years was that?

A: Well they started their operation there in 1946 and they quit in 1964 . I suppose from about 1958 till they shut down in 1964 they probably averaged right around 100 men.

Q: But there's no particular activity there now?

A: None whatsoever, outside of just some reclamation work, about all they do now.

Q: I think probably the thing that everyone thinks about is the scar on the face of the earth that it's left on these farms. How many farms were taken would you say, or do you have any idea?

A: I would say there was -- in the whole there's 5,600 acres of land that the Peabody Coal Company owns. Of those 5,600 acres there's probably 1,200 acres of farm ground that is still tillable, that is left as tillable. The remainder is in timber, pasture that was never stripped which was probably 400 or 500 acres. The rest of it is all nothing but wasteland from the strip operation, spoil bank as they are called. Most of that has been partly reclaimed and seeded down with grasses of clover or alfalfa and brome for pasture. Cattle is running on a lot of it, a lot of it isn't fenced yet so we can't run cattle.

Q: Do you have any idea, you've given me the number of acres, do you have any idea of how many farms it was?

A: To start with, I suppose there was approximately twenty farms. They have. . .

Q: Do you have the names of some of the farm owners that sold their farms don't you?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you like to tell me about who they are?

A: Well, there was a John Lempke, that was in the western side, right at the western edge of Mineral Township in Bureau County. George Kirley farm, Fred Odell farm, George Moore farm, Fred Moore farm, Toddy Gotheridge farm, Anton Heise farm, Carl Carlson farm, Peed farm, Jerry Peed I believe it was, Bill Comp, Bill Hansen farm, Frank Winters farm, Elmer Johnson farm. There was Chris Studley's farm, there's two sets of buildings there that have been destroyed. Buildings have all been taken off from these

A: places. Greely Rowell there was two sets of buildings there that have been all removed. Charles Hansen had his two sets of buildings, those have all been removed. And there's about, let's see, there's five, seven sets of buildings that they didn't remove. So that pretty well covers what there was in farms, as far as building were concerned. The seven sets of buildings that weren't removed was divided up between four farmers and the whole territory, the 5,600 acres has been divided up into four units. There's four of us that farm the four units, the spoils are used for pasture, and then the tillable ground we farm.

Q: Who were the other farmers that are. . .

A: The farms that weren't destroyed was, there was Herby Norton farm, that was not destroyed, that's a unit now. There was the Bill Riley place and the Amor Moore farm, those are both in the one unit now. Well, and then the George Moore, there was another farm that George Moore owned, the three farms are under one unit and then there was the John Sullivan farm, is in one unit. The other unit I can't tell you just what that place was, it's in Sheffield, right south of Sheffield and I know who did own that unit, before it was stripped.

Q: There used to be quite a bit of trouble, those mines are dangerous aren't they, the lakes?

A: The lakes are dangerous. The banks are so steep on each side, and then we have had problems with the banks would slide out into the lakes after they've set even for twenty years. For some reason the banks will just slide off and into the edge of the water, right out into the lakes.

Q: I happen to know the fishing was wonderful because I used to fish there, with your dad and you. On one of the farms there is a "witness tree", tell me about it.

A: That "witness tree" is -- well where it got its name was in 1851 and 1853 when they surveyed for the Rock Island Railroad. They used that tree as a reference point while they were surveying for the Rock Island Railroad. That tree is located in the southeast corner of Section 29, in Mineral Township.

Q: Right now it's got a fence around it hasn't it ?

A: It's got a fence around it right now and it sets right along the blacktop road now and it's a big oak tree.

Q: Were there a lot of trees that were used for that or was that the main one or what?

A: No, that was -- the way I understand it, that was the only tree that was used in Mineral Township for the railroad where it runs through Mineral Township.

Q: Now can you think of anything more that you'd like to tell me about the mines?

A: Oh, I don't know really, outside of the fact that at the time the mines were in there I don't think -- there was some objection to it at the time on account of the wasteland. But I think as times went on -- this farming -- the ground is getting less and less all the time. I think there is more objection to it now. I think that if they were to come in now, they would have an awful time probably of getting the permit to strip the land. There would be a lot more objectors to it anyhow. If they were -- if they had did a better job of reclamation I don't think there would be as many objections now to this stripping operation as there is.

Q: original form. They do now?

A: None whatsoever. They didn't -- when they first started they did none whatsoever. Then the state and federal government started putting some pressure on so they did knock the peaks off the tops of the spoil banks. But now -- when I quit work at Victoria in 1973, 1972 I'll take that back, I run a dozer down there on reclamation work and when I left there the instructions we had there when we went out there to do the reclamation work was that they had to be able to drive across the spoils with a pickup truck. They had to be smooth enough that they could drive across them with a pickup truck.

Q: Oh, I was going to ask you how much of the peak they had to take off.

A: They had to level it back to enough so you could drive across it with a truck.

Q: You mean so you could drive crossways?

A: Crossways, any way you wanted to go.

Q: Did they ever do anything to seed the banks down?

A: They. . .

Q: Or put trees or anything on it?

A: Not as far as trees were concerned. They have walked -- up where I -- at Mineral there they come in there with a dozer and just knocked the top off the spoil, and then they would walk down the spoil with hand seeders and seed it. Then they did finally get to where they had airplanes come in and do the seeding with airplanes. Spread the seed.

Q: Now when you say seed, you mean a grass seed?

A: Grass seed -- alfalfa and bromw grass mix.

Q: You farm how many acres?

A: I've got, I have about 2,000 acres leased, there's 430, about 400

A: acres of farm ground. The rest of it is pasture and timber land and spoil banks and pasture.

Q: And lakes?

A: And lakes.

Q: Irvin, let's go back to -- I want you to tell me a little bit more about the machines. I know this one was so big, was that the stripper that you said was so big?

A: It was a stripper and it was as I said before, a fifty yard machine. It was assembled in -- either the winter of 1945 or 1946 I believe they assembled it. They shipped it in -- it was so big that they shipped it in on railroad cars. They put a spur off the Rock Island Line to the construction site. It all came in on flatcars and it was put together with big cranes, they put up big cranes to move the stuff around and put it together -- riveted it together, the rivets were all heated and put together, it was all riveted together, the machine was.

Q: It was actually assembled there like a factory?

A: Like a factory.

Q: How many years was it in operation?

A: Built in 1946 and they quit their operation in 1964 and when they quit their operation they tore the machine down and moved it, tore it down in small enough parts to be loaded on flatbed trucks, semi-trucks, and it was hauled to somewhere in Missouri and reassembled there and put back into operation again.

Q: I remember hearing about that at the time and that the machine was so big that they had to bring it in on boxcars. Irvin, I think you've painted a beautiful picture of what strip mining is and I want to thank you so much for talking to me and telling me about it. Thank you so much.

I hereby release all right, title, or interest in and to all or any part of my tape-recorded memoirs to Starved Rock Library System subject to the following stipulations:

PLACE Wyand, IL

DATE Nov 19-1975

Lvin Flint

(INTERVIEWEE)

Merle Routh

(for Starved Rock Library System)

INTERVIEW CONTENTS

NARRATOR'S NAME Irvin Flint -

TAPE NO 7

TIME

SUBJECTS

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 1 to | 1. Introduction |
| 6 | 2. What strip mining is. |
| 21 to | 3. When & when did strip mining start |
| 36 | 4. Where does the land come from for mines |
| 45 to | 5. Who were the first mining companies |
| 57 | 6. When did. York (Flint) start. |
| 62 to | 7. Mining Machinery |
| 79 | 8. About the lakes & sink |
| 106 to | 9. About ^{some of lakes} the depth of coal. |
| 118 | 10. Kind of coal - Bituminous |
| 126 to | 11. Mine not active now. |
| 144 | 12. Tipple |
| 154 to | 13. Mine in Mineral Area & where moved. |
| 166 | 14. Number of employees & for how long |
| 179 to | 15. The farms taken for mines. |
| 196 | 16. Seeding the spoils. |
| 202 to | 17. Number & names of farm owners |
| 239 | 18. Wanger in lakes |
| 270 | 19. Seeding |
| 272 to | 20. The Witness Tree. |
| 292 | 21. Buying up the farms. |
| 308 to | 22. Reclamation of the spoils |
| 327 | 23. Seeding the spoils - by land & airplane. |
| 346 - | 24. The stripper! How assembled |
| to | 25. and length of operation. |

INTERVIEWER'S NOTES AND WORD LIST

- Irvin Flint

Instructions to the Interviewer:

To assist the transcriptionist, please identify:

1. Passages which may be difficult to understand because of outside noise, other people in the room, problems with the tape recorder, etc.
2. Passages which are confidential and therefore should not be typed.
3. Passages which need to be treated in a special way.

Please list words or phrases which might be difficult to understand, all proper names, and unfamiliar terms. If there is more than one tape, note where the second and succeeding ones begin.

TAPE NO. 1

NAMES of farm owners

Lempke
George Kirley
Fred Odell
George Moore
Fred Moore
Gatheridge (Titty) or (Daddy)
Anthon Heise ANTON
Carl Carlson
Jerry Feed
Bill Comp
Harry Carlson
Bill Hansen
Pete. Johnson

REPORTER: J. P. N. Flint ADDRESS: Mineral ILL.

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INTERVIEWER Marilyn Fort PROJECT 699-7214

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Yes ☐ No ☒

THE

This section is for office use. Write the date in the larger columns and check the smaller ones to record each interview.

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INTERVIEWER'S COMMENTS

..... *Flint* Memoir
(narrator's name)

Interviewer's observations about the interview setting, physical description of the narrator, comments on narrator's veracity and accuracy, and candid assessment of the historical value of the memoir.

Note: Use parentheses () to enclose any words, phrases or sentences that should be regarded as confidential.

The mining was done by horses & mules and a slip but this man was too young to remember this.

.....(date).....

..... *Merle Rautt*
(interviewer's name)