

Cherry Mine disaster and life in Spring Valley
an Oral History Interview

Mary Koyak, Interviewee
Of Spring Valley, Illinois

Interview Date: July 19, 1975

Oral History Tape Number: TC OH 30 KOY
Tape Number: 30
Number of Transcribed Pages: 11

Subject(s) Covered: Cherry mine, coal mining

Starved Rock Library System History Collection

Digitized under an Illinois Historical Records Preservation Grant
awarded in 2013 to the Peru Public Library
1409 11th Street, Peru, Illinois 61354

NARRATOR: Mary Koyak

TAPE: 1

DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 19, 1975

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Roosevelt Square, 1015 Park Ave East, Princeton, Ill

INTERVIEWER: Kerrie Johnson

FOR: Starved Rock Library System

I: This is Kerrie Johnson and I am interviewing Mary Koyak for the Starved Rock Library System at Roosevelt Square in Princeton Ill. The date is July 19, 1975, and the subject is the Cherry Mine Disaster. Mary would you like to tell me how _____ (noise on tape) _____?

N: Well, if you could, you know, if you could ask me something. All I know is some of my friends were lost there.

I: You had friends that were there?

N: Oh, ya, my Godmother's husband and her two boys. They were lost there. Then I knew about 5 men, they were lost there. They were all from Spring Valley and all Lithuanians.

I: Do you know what started the fire?

N: Well, the way, you know, when you're young you don't pay attention, the way and I--a guy was talking yesterday outside and he said the same thing what I said and I was wondering, "What's he gonna say?" And the way I heard, you know when you're young, and I just started going with my honey. They could have saved it but the straw, now I don't know whether the straw was loose or was straw or hay, I don't know which it was. You know how kids are. Don't pay attention. And it was loose or baled, I don't remember, caught on fire and if they could have doused that out then they could have saved it. They could have saved it if they had doused that fire out that's only-- and that guy, this here guy said yesterday to the same thing I'm telling you now. I thought he maybe have different story. I says, well, you got the same thing as I got. Ya.

I: Do you know what happened after the fire started?

N: Well, you know, people rushed to help them people out. See? Even just

sitting here, a man from the business, I don't know for sure if he was running a garage, he went down there to help to take the bodies out and he was _____ too. Didn't come back.

I: When people, when they found out that there was a fire down below in the mines, you said everybody started to try to help them out.

N: Ooh, yes, like I said this here businessman went down and he was lost too.

I: Did any people get out?

N: Well, they took some out while they were able. Then kinda towards the end to much and they had to close it but I don't remember which one of my Godmothers were take-'cause one of them, you know when you're young, you don't pay _____. They took, I don't, which one they took that ladies, my godmothers, two boys out first or the husband but one of them were left yet. They had to close it off again because there was too much fire. But that closing, how long it was, that was one thing, you know, we were young kids. I didn't pay much attention how long _____ then they open up. Then they took the other bodies out. But I couldn't tell you, was it old man, was the last one or was the boys the last ones to take up.

I: Were you at the mine when this happened?

N: Well, no, I wasn't at the mine but I was there, you know when they were IN the casket. Under the big tent. Yes, I was there. My father took me down there.

I: How did they identify the men after they took them out?

N: Well, that's one thing I couldn't tell you, honey, -but-I don't know how but they done it. That's one thing I couldn't tell you.

I: Did they have some people that they couldn't identify?

N: Well, maybe they did but I didn't pay attention, you know when you're

kids, you know if you're an elder person you know, maybe you would try to but you know, when your're young and I jsut started going with my husband at that time. I just started going and then it happened Saturday and then Sunday he called me up, He says, " I'm going to Cherry" He says, " See down there." And si U stayed homw and he went to Cherry with his buddies. See, I was from Spring Valley and my husband was from Seatonville, see.

I: Did your husband have any family members that were in the Cherry Mine?

N: Oh, my, no. This one here. No, just my Godmother had her family there. But the other guys, you know, there was five, well, that was five with the other three, no, let me see, two Parsity boys, and one guy, I don't remember he was- I was a bride for his wedding when he got married.

I: He was married when he was _____?

N: Oh, yes and then his wife was going to get married again. She was going to ask me to be bride again but I was getting married myself and the other guy, it was such a funny name, is Clocoonus, was my girlfriends brother-in-law and the other guy was a Spring Valley boy just like I was. And I knew him all my life. Joe.

I: What should I ask you? You actually- your father took you to the mine then?

N: Oh, ya, my father _____ I con't understand why he took me in the evening, see. You know, he wanted to see my Godmother, you know and my mother-they were there berfore, see, by father took-but not right away. They dodn't take me right away but they took me next time. My mother went, my father first but after, one Sunday they took me but I can't remember whose body we seen there in the tent. Was it the boys or was it my Godmothers husband. I don't know which.

I: Were any of them alive?

N: Honey!!!

I: No, were either of the brothers or her husband still alive or did they all three die?

N: Well, yeah.

I: All three died.

N: Oh, yes, I'm telling you, honey, I don't know which one they had to close it up. Oh, yes. They were dead. Starved. Sure the ones who were left was starved and the ones from in the first place in the fire, they were dead. All of them were dead. There was not one person and then it was even- I didn't know this, but this other guy said, I said that guy should be punished who done that- they said here-because make him suffer. Look all the people who were lost. Nearly 300 people. "Oh," this guy says, "He was lost. He got burned." That guy got burned.

I: Who decided to close the mine?

N: Well, I guess, the company. I don't know about that. I guess everybody, cause they can't get in. Too much fire and I can't tell you how long it was closed before they open up again. I couldn't tell you because, you know, maybe some people, older people take interest in it, see.?

(noise on tape)

N: My godmother, she started-you know-the young boy he was not old enough to go there. She didn't think she was going to get money for him but she did and she started drink and everything. I think she got cancer from that.

I: She was very upset.

N: Oh _____ anybody. Three--at once, see--three at once, see. and now them Lithuaian people, they're all buried, you wouldn't know, you know, Spring Valley Cemeteries, you wouldn't know. Honey? You don't know them Cememteries in Spring Valley. It's Irish cemetery. You know when you leave Prinnton here you have to go through Seatonville and through Spring

Valley and then you have to go to Peru. Of course, you can go to Peru two ways now. Past our new cemetery. The North end of Spring Valley to Peru. Well, you could take that road that way and you could see the cemetery and you could take the --- Peru but if you take that from Spring Valley, well you go to straight past our house towards Peru, then there's a road goes North that the Irish cemetery. We call it. But there's not only Irish, but Lithuanians, Italians were buried there, too. And well, they all buried- _____ had to go in it's right facing the West side. They're all buried _____ all of them, the Lithuanians.

I: Did the company do anything for the people who had families?

N: I guess they support them. I never ask anyone about that, cause you know, when you are a kid you don't pay attention. Like today, you know, we didn't have no high school. We didn't know nothing about such a thing, see? And now today, you know, the old people maybe would know something about that but young kids. We didn't know nothing. We Were dumb. (laughs) What can I say? Yes then-----we just toke a ride-was it last year or so? My grandson took -we always go to, maybe you have heard of Rips in Ladd? We always go for chicken there. I like the chicken best. Then this grandson, he wanted to see, you know, Cherry has got the cemetery there now. Some of them ain't got no family. They made a cemetery that time. There was none but they made one and then he went there like a big monument there. It's maybe got all the men, _____ their names on there. (pause) I wasn't in close. I was in the car see, I wasn't close to it. Cause anyhow if I was close, see, my eyes is bad, I couldn't maybe see it.

I: Do they have a special memorial service in Cherry?

N: Oh, yes. Every year, honey. Every year that's- see, it was Nov. 13. Every year but, of course, now that I'm here I don't know. Oh yes. cause there celebration always come on Armistice Day. Armistice Day come the 11th.

You know of Nov. Well this come the 13th. Oh yes.

I: Did you know any one in the mine and got out?

N: No, no honey. Nobody _____ that I know. Nobody got out.

That I know, I don't know. Maybe some got out but I don't know, I don't know.

(tape shuts off)

I: Would you tell me about the boys that were found in the well?

N: Yes I can tell you that, too. It was-see, my neighbor had a farm across the river.

I: Was this when you were married or was it when you were still young?

N: Oh, I was about 11 years old and how I remember is that same night my brother was born. See that's how I think I remember. And see this lady-the old lady-the mother of them kids-see my folks had trouble with her.

They were _____ Princeton. Well, she came home earlier, this lady, but my folks didn't. They stayed in Seatonville. Stopped at their friends place before they come home. And this one here was crying. I know she had, her brother was sick and she was crying and I thought well her brother might be dying, you know, I thinking to myself. Maybe her brother dying. But I didn't find out til next morning. Here my mother got a baby and then after that, you know people started talk, talk, you know after that. _____ all over the family to look for the boys. They They couldn't fine it, An old farm house. So they come back to the farm house and they seen the dog. And the little wagon there and that dog was always barking, and barking, and barking. So some guy-somebody said, I don't know who it was or what, cause you know kids, you don't pay attention, when you're 11 years old, how they are or what. He said "let's go see what that dog is barking at" and they went to see and there was _____

I: How old was the boys?

N: Well, I couldn't tell you, honey. One the boys must of been older than me cause I was 11. The other one was younger.

I: Did the boys just fall in?

N: No but they was saying that the sister and her boyfriend threw them in. That's all I heard. I never heard nothing after that. There was hardly any talks about it. You know today anything happen, you know yourself,

I don't have to tell you, honey. Law right away looks into it but there was no law at that time, nothing. Nothing. So, of course, if somebody else had done it maybe the parents would of looked into it but like they said the daughter and boyfriend, why maybe they, you know, maybe they want to keep it quiet. Shut up. That's the way I figure. Don't you see?

I: Mmhmm.

N: That's the way I feel and then you know I remember just like it was today, how my brother was born and that then brother and sister come to see the baby and my mother says to her, she says, "ain't you crying for your brothers?" She says, "what for? So people would laugh at me?" (laughs)

I: Why would she think that people would laugh at her?

N: _____ she don't want to _____ so that people look at me and laugh. Maybe they knew something about it. Maybe that the reason. See, maybe that the reason she done that, too. Maybe she had heard people talk. Maybe that's the reason she said that. Boy, that was something. _____ like our son _____ that Irish cemetery and they buried them both on SUnDay. Carriages and buggies. And I don't know if you know where our hospital is at? Well, you know, us kids, anybody died of Lithuanians, we all kids go to cemetery. Way down there, walk. We always take a shortcut. There was a mine there and we didn't want to go clear around and there was a mine there and they had a bridge so we used to go through that mine bridge and cross that and we cut

through and there's a Polish cemetery from Peru there before you get to this Irish cemetery and us kids was watching that funeral on top of that hill where the boys were getting buried and this one here--the hearse was right there at the cemetery and _____ passing the hospital _____, you know, (noise on tape) there was 18 _____ and 9 carriages _____ (noise on tape) _____ you wouldn't believe that.

I: That's a big wedding.

N: Mhm. (pause) and there was shut, shut, shuta, no more _____

N: The middle was Eddiw, and the little one, I just forget what;s his name and the younger one was Clemens, his name was. I just forget-the tall boy. I think it was George- I'm not mistaken. There was a bunch of kids. One kid was no good. He was mean. Used to cuss at people.

I: Sounds like that sister _____ must not have been very nice.

N: Huh?

I: Sounds like that sister must not have been very nice.

N: Well, sure not. Sure not. Sure not. (pause) Well, you know something must of happened there and you know, how it is. Maybe that was what happened, see? And she married that guy but why she married that guy was for the money. You know that was the first war. He was into. Well, he get killed, get the money but no, he didn't get killed. She got fooled. She didn't get _____ (laughs). Oh, yes, she had nice, very nice boy. Nice quiet boy. I was at the funeral to see her boy and he's buried down there to at the same ---no, I take that back. He's buried in our Lithuanian cemetery at Spring Valley. _____

(tape shuts off)

N: You wouln't beleive it that I was over 20 times bridesmaid.

I: Really?

N: Honest.

I: Boy, you must have been awful popular.

N: Well, I think it was on account of my folks run a business. The first one was a saloon then next it was a store after that. When I grew up they quit the saloon, they open the store and there were so many old country people coming in our town there. Girls and boys. Only 2 American girls that I was a bridesmaid. All was from across the _____. I was bridesmaid for then I was three times Godmother, and then I was seven times Confirmation Godmother. I started to go to a wedding when I was 13 years old.

I: Oh, boy.'

N: And I started dancing when I was a kid. And I didn't like to dance with my girlfriends. I wanted to dance with a big man. (laughs) Ain't I a devil? (laughter) I was proud because I got a guy dancing with me. (pause) No, I wouldn't--to tell the truth--I wouldn't want to be a girl today. Nothing good today for girls. Now my time, we had summertime and winter we had dances. Go out and dance there and there. When summertime come there was parks. There was Polish, Poluski(sp), They call it Webster Park. Oh, that name is still going on. Maybe you heard of Webster Park. Well, that was a park then that's still going on, Webster. That's where we used to go, my husband--when I started with my husband. I used to go to Polish there- _____ Lithuanian. That was most Lithuanian park not Polish. And been-----I've been living all my life, see on 2nd and 3rd street. There's a track there, going from the mine. Go way down to the East. from West to the East. Well the track way, you know, we all walked. The girls and boys. Went to the dances walking. Way up to #3. I don't know if you know where

that #3 mine is at.

I: No.

N: Oh, yes, you know, there's a girl here working, she's married. She married a Spring Valley boy and I know her family. The family she married. _____ (lawn-
mower) _____ so a Wisconsin girl. And oh she told me now they're building so many homes around that mine. And them people that lost their- you know-lost their boys, they live there too. I used to go when I was a kid and and visit them up there. Up their place all the time. Then wintertime come and I started going with my husband. Oh, I didn't finish about the track. Then all of us girls and boys go home singing to beat the band.

(toilet flushes)

Then when I started going with my husband, My husband didn't like that park' there _____ in Webster Park _____ cause all them big shots used to go there. Wintertime come we used to have marvelous shows in our town. That's _____ but lent, you know Catholic people _____ kind of, want to be kind of strict. You couldn't go to show. We just take a walk or stay at home or visit girlfriend. Used to come in their buggy. Four boys used to come in one buggy from Seatonville to Spring Valley. My husband had a boyfriend. His boyfriend was a boyfriend to my girlfriend. So they was always together all four of us were together. Now she's dead. All my old, old, old girls are all gone. None of them living. I'm only the one that's _____ all the girlfriends I had since I was a little kid all gone, all gone, You know, I got kind of stomach _____ today. I don't know if it's on account of bowels or what it is. And I hate to ask-bother the girls. Maybe go away, you know, but I think I'll have to ask them if it don't go away. But I'm going to wait til 2 o'clock. See, we have coffee break at two. -- where do you have your fun, honey?

(lawnmower)

N: You go many dances?

I: Not really.

N: Oh, that was what I used to like. Me and my husband. We just loved to dance. My husband won a prize in Seatonville, not Seatonville, but Peru and Hollowville for waltz dance. My husband did. He was _____.
Oh, yes, there's a few guys I met here. They all dace in that same _____
Fred, And ther's Bob and there's a guy named John _____. He's from Seatonville. They all danced in same park. They're all about the age like my husband and then when we get together we talk about old times. See, so nice when you got somebody to talk old times, ain't it?

I: Mhm.

N: No, I wouldn't want to be girl today. Now them _____
girls hanging aound the saloons. I just hate that. Now my father run a saloon. Just because my father run-a saloon I have to be in there _____?
(laughs)

I: Well, Mary, I want to thank you for the interview.

N: Yes, but honey, I would like to tell you more.... if I could. I'm sorry I can't tell you more, honey.

I: Oh, that's fine.

Beverly Black

Transcriptionist.