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Alba Klien

A.K.: My name is Alba Calvine Klien. I'm going to talk about Iron Mountain a long time ago when I was a very young girl. I ~~have~~ had the advantage of parents who came from Europe. My father, Valerio Calvino, was born in Italy. My mother, Anna Sandretto Calvino, was born in France, but of Italian parentage. They were married in Moneheim, Germany. They had children in Luxembourg, France, but they also lived in Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium. World war I was coming along and my father didn't want to go to war because he didn't believe in some of the things they were fighting for in Europe at that time. So he went to South America for a while, seeking freedom that was not on the landscape in Europe. My mother waited for him and listened to his letters. She saw he was very unhappy, so she wrote to him in Argentina, "Meet me in Iron Mountain, Michigan, where I have some sisters." So she took my brother Calvin and my sister Idea, crossed the ocean and went through Elis Island and came to Iron Mountain where her sisters were. My father in the meantime, worked his way up from Buenos Aires, up the coast to Rio de Janeiro, took a Portugese ship, came to Elis Island, and came to Iron Mountain. I was born in Iron Mountain in 1915. Their only American child. I had the back-ground of the fact that my parents talked five foreign languages, so I learned three before I went to school: English, French, and Italian. My parents believed that if you went to a country, you should never live among your own people, which would be Italian, because you cannot learn the language well. So they lived down on Luddington St. That was the west side of Iron

Mountain, and the people around them were Polish and English. My father had built a house for my mother. You see, he was a mason, and his job was building houses, churches, buildings for people. In Europe he used to work 16 hours a day at 10¢ an hour. A dollar sixty a day, how would you like wages like that? So he came to America hoping to make a better life for his family. He built the house out of bricks down on Luddington Street, and you must remember, I was born in that house. In those days, children were not born in hospitals, as they are in this day and age. The house had two stories. It was heated by a coal stove. The kitchen stove had a wood stove. I always remember it always had hot water, because by the side of that wood stove there was a reservoir. My mother filled it with water, and there wasn't any water at the faucet as we have it again. She had to go outside, prime the pump, and pump it by hand, carry it by a pail into the house, and put it in the reservoir, which was part of the stove. Then the wood stove would heat up the water. We were very lucky, because on the bottom of that reservoir was a faucet. I thought that was wonderful. All you had to do was turn the faucet handle and there you had hot water. Almost like this modern day and age. For bathrooms, we had the outside toilet. My mother kept it clean. She used to take lye water. I never could understand how she could put her hands in that lye water to wash things so sparkling clean that they were almost white. But, every Saturday night she had a tin tub, and she would bring in the tin tub, and have heated hot water, carry water outside from the pump, and everybody had their Saturday bath.

So you see, even though things were rather rugged, we could still be clean. That house there on Luddington had five acres. My mother had come from a farming community in Italy, so we had a cow, she also had a pig, she had chickens, and she had some ducks in a pond. In this day and age in Iron Mountain, that would be against the law. You can't have animals like that on the premises, but in those days, everybody seemed to have their own private milk factory, because you see, with a cow we had milk. And had our own private egg factory, and once in a while my mother would sell some eggs. And also our own private chicken factory, which is very unusual in these times. That is the sort of community in which I grew up. Because we were on the west side, there weren't very many houses, so there was lots of land for me to roam as a little girl. I can always remember when my mother would go shopping uptown. We would walk uptown, and of course in the beginning her English was not that good, so of she couldn't make herself understood in English, she would use the French or the Italian, and somebody would understand her. She never had an interpreter, 'cause she was determined that she was going to do her own business by herself. This is the background from which I came. On Saturday night, that was rough times in a place called Hewitt Street in Iron Mountain. You see, around Iron Mountain, there was a logging community, and also many mines. So Saturday night when the miners were paid and the loggers were paid, you can imagine where they would go. To the taverns, to have their beer. My mother would come up the street and she had an old tin bucket. She would get that full of beer, and she

would take that home for my father. Many times there might be a fight on Saturday night between the loggers and the miners. I can remember holding on to my mother's skirts, sometimes crying, wondering why all those people were beating each other around them, 'cause that was a hot and heavy time in Iron Mountain. So, things went along. As I said, I was born in '15, but the World War I was happening in Europe. America went into the war about the year 1918, I believe. The day was April 6th, it went through November 11, 1919. Again it was wartime in Iron Mountain as it was for all communities. Just about that time, about 1919, we went to Iron River for a period of about six years. Again, we have to think back to the conditions of the times. My father was building property. There wasn't that much building in Iron Mountain, but there was lots of building in Iron River, and for that reason he went to Iron River, because cars were not that plentiful. You either had to go by train in those days, or if you had a horse or if you could hop a ride with somebody, because cars were just beginning to come along for the smaller people. I remember when we had our first car. It was 1919 and my young brother learned how to drive it. We always thought that was a thrill when those old _____ open and it was very very cold. But then all of a sudden, business started to pick up in Iron Mountain again. The Ford Motor Company decided that Iron Mountain was a great place to establish a factory. They came to Iron Mountain in the '20s. The reason that Ford picked Iron Mountain for such a venture was the fact that there was lots of wood, and of course there were the mines, and also there was a labor market. Coming in to America

were the various ethnic groups. When we came back to Iron Mountian the second time, we moved to a home that my father built again on the 200 block of West D Street. Again my parents did not pick the north side of Iron Mountain. The Italians lived on the north side. But my mother felt again, to perfect yourself in a language, you should always live among the people of the counrty. Where we were on D Street, the English people lived. We were completely surrounded by English people. These Engish people came from Wales. Right next to us was a man who had been working in the mines in England, and when he came here he became a mining captain. Across the street again was another mining captain. We were surrounded by this mining element. The mines were very profitable at the time, because iron ore was very good. As I said , we lived in the west side where the English people were. There was also the French people. The town began to be divided. They began to live in localities. Most of the Italians lived in the north side. The Swedish people lived on what was called the Hill. That would be the east side of Iron Mountain. So we had an element of racism that was going on. The young people had a hard time going with each other. I can remember the fact that my brother had a girlfriend who was Swedish. My mother would say to him, " Oh, no, that's not the girl for you. You should have an Italian girl." And of course heremother would say to the girl, " You should not have an Italian boyfriend, you must have a Swedish boyfriend." You see, they wanted their children to find companionship within their own race. They forgot that America was a melting pot. And so we had racism. Again and again on

Saturday nights, there were fights between the groups. Fights between the Swedish people and the Italians, or the Swedish people and the English people. They were really brawls, beating each other. But the labor market was here, so Ford was glad to establish a factory. It had been said that at one time Ford had 7000 men working for him in this factory. When you think of that many people way back in the '20s. It had been said that our population in Iron Mountain alone was 20,000, compared to 8,000 at the present time. Well, the situation was so bad, can you imagine people living in chicken shacks? That's exactly what happened in the '20s. There was no place to live. There were not enough homes, so garages were converted into homes. Where people had chickens, those were converted into homes. I remember visiting people whos home had been a former chicken shack. You can imagine the smell. Anyplace they could find, they would use it for homes. People still did not have tolerance for each other. It would take a longer time than that to have tolerance. You can imagine the community. I was growing up and I was in the grades in Iron Mountain at that time. The schools? There were quite a few schools. There were more schools in Iron Mountain at that time than there are now. There was a school that was way up what we called the 25 addition. They called it the 25 addition or the 25 location because there was a mine up there and they called it the 25 mine. There was a school up there which is no longer existing. There was the Central School, which was a wooden building downtown. There was the high school which my father had helped build in 1911, which was supposed to

be an improvement. There was the Lincoln School which no longer exists. There was also the Washington School and that no longer exists. And we had the Hull School which was the seventh and eighth grade school way up on the hill. It looked like a castle, and that no longer exists. So there were more schools in those days almost than we have in the present time. The enrollment was quite large, again because of the population of the town. The schooling was very very good, though. I always considered myself to have a good education as far as Iron Mountain was concerned. But, every ethnic group, because of the fact that there were so many mines, then there was Ford's, they needed to have more people here. I can remember my mother writing back to Italy, and she helped to get her brothers and some cousins over here. And the brothers who came, one brother worked in the mine, and the other brother worked with my father as a mason, building buildings that had to be built. The other cousins worked in the mine. That was happing with most of the families. The people came over here; they had jobs. There was lots of work to do. Saleries weren't very high, but it was the year 1920 after W.W.I, til about 1929, just before the crash. Those were called the "boom and bust" years, all over America. Conditions were very good, but people were buying so much in credit, which was typical of Iron Mountain, that everyone thought, "This is never going to end. It's going to be great forever." So actually as far as want in those years, people were not in want in Iron Mountain. Maybe want for a house, but they found some housing, even if it was a chicken shack or a garage. But eventually as the workers came, new houses were

being built all along the way and then people just crowded together. Remember, in our house, which was a two story house, we had 14 people living in it, and that was a lot of people. My mother would get up at five o'clock in the morning and she would get the buckets ready for the miners to go to the mine, because we had other people stay there besides the relatives. My sister and I worked very hard as young girls helping my mother, either doing the baking or making the beds or ironing clothes for her. I think this is typical of the life of most of the people those days. Even the young found some work somewhere. Of course wages were very low. I can remember washing a car for 25¢. That doesn't sound like very much in this day and age, but it seemed a lot at that particular time. All of a sudden in 1929, we had the crash. Most of the people had been thrifty. My parents were, because they had been very very poor. My father , when he came here, knowing the bad conditions in Europe, he had been a labor organizer. He helped to organize the American Federation of Labor Bricklayers Union. In fact, he was a member of that union for over fifty years, in order to improve the lot of the working man. The wages were begining to get better. With the crash, everything fell apart. My father and mother, and I'm sure this happened to a lot of people, their money was frozen in the banks. With the crash, remember they had the bank moratorium, so people could not get their money out. So my high school years were not that great, for the simple reason that the depression came along. Conditions were hard for everyone. I can remember during high school years when we were juniors we were supposed to go out and sell magazines. Who could sell a magazine to anybody

in those days? People weren't working. My father hadn't worked for two years at that time. And when it came to the senior year we wanted to have an Argonaut. We are the only class, the class of 1933, we are the only class that never had an Argonaut, which is the school annual, because we could not afford to have it. We felt very resentful, so when it came to selling the magazines, many of us took our magazine folders that we were supposed to use, and we shredded them up like confetti and threw em all over the school lot, 'cause we were angry at what was handed to us, because here we were graduating, and no jobs. A lot of the boys went into what was called the CCCs. The Civilian Conservation Corps. In fact, at that time the schools would graduate in January and in June. But what was the sense of graduating in January? There was no work. So you might just as well stay in school until June, and that extra half year of schooling, at least you had some place to stay at your folks and maybe someplace to eat. Maybe you'd find a job here and a job there, hopefully, even if it was just a few cents. So, when I graduated, I was able to get a job working for the Wisconsin Michigan Power Co. But to get the job, I'll have to tell you what happened. My sister who had graduated in 1926, worked for the company. But when she married in 1932, her husband had a job and she had a job, but because the depression was so bad in 1933, the company said, " Sorry, it's a government ruling: only one person can work in a family." My sister had to give up her job, because her husband was working. So as she gave up her job, I stepped into it. That's how you got a job in those days. Somebody either

died or you stepped into their job. Otherwise you were out of luck. I was very glad to get the job, because my father hadn't worked in two years. Now to stay two years without working and have to live on your resourses, trying to get a little bit at a time, maybe ten % at a time of their money in the bank. That was bad. My mother never trusted banks after that. She used to take money and hide it all over the house. And when she got older, into her 80s, once we found $3300 in the house, 'cause she had hid it. No way again was she going to be in that position, to have the banks fail on her and not to have any money, not even to buy food. You can see what the depression did to a lot of the people with their thinking. It wasn't just my mother. There were many people. And instead of trusting the banks they kept their money in the home. And of course we know robbers will come along so money isn't exactly that safe. I have to tell you about the job, when you talk about salaries in 1933. I went to work for 15¢ an hour as a secretary. I had been valedictorian of my class, and I had wanted to college. Two scholarships, but no way of earning board and room. Of a class of 145 students only 5 of us went to college. No one else could afford to go. We had to find some work or do something else. My husband, but he wasn't my husband at the time, went to work as a machinist for $9 a week for six days a week and sometimes 10 hours a day. What do you think of that for salaries for you for people of this day and age? So it was very very rough times. And when they say that people did not starve, that was a lie

of the depression, 'cause people did starve. I can remember that in those days we had lots of trains in Iron Mountain, more than we have now. There aren't any trains now, as far as passenger trains. But there were many trains at that time. We could see, 'cause we were about two blocks from the train, we could see coming down the tracks, we'd call the hoboes . They would be riding the rods. Riding the rods would be riding underneith the train. To go from one part of the country looking for jobs, they couldn't afford a ticket very well, so they would hitch a ride. Of course it was against the law. Many times they could have an arm cut off or a foot cut off, 'cause it was very dangerous riding underneith the cars. When they would come to Iron Mountain, my mother would say, " I think they've got an x marked on our house." Because they would come directly to the house asking for food. My mother and father never turned them away. Whatever we had we shared, because we remembered how it was to be hungry. I think we weren't the only ones. I think there were other people too. When you're talking about people out of work in Iron Mountain and all over the country, relief, we didn't have welfare. You either had to earn it or you didn't. You know that expression, "If your hands don't move your mouth don't move" If you don't work you're not going to eat. You have to do something. We pooled resourses. These men, these hoboes riding the rails, they would have their Hobo jungles and we could see them around on different spots. In a place where there would be a little gully, it would be protected, they would gather a

little wood and they would start a fire and they would try to make themselves some coffee, cooking perhaps out of a tin can or something that had been thrown away. They would share with each other. That's the way that life was in those times.
How does it feel to be young? It wasn't a very pleasant happening, yet, looking back at it, maybe because we didn't have so much, we had to learn to get along with each other. I can remember a group of our friends. Gasoline at that time was 25¢ a gallon. It encouraged people to buy gasoline. sometimes they would have specials of 5 gallons for a dollar. Plus you'd get maybe some free glassware, or maybe a dish or maybe some silverware, 'cause that was a gimmick they would have to have you buy gas at the different stations. Sounds so ridiculous compared to what we have to do in this day and age. But even at 25¢ a gallon, we , when we were very young, in order do something, (My brother loaned us his car.)so, a bunch of us, we'd pool our quarters to get gas for the car. That was the only way we could have any fun, then we'd go on a picnic. We could go many places and picnics were for free. We used to say, "The best things in life are free." That was a song of those times around Iron Mountain. It seemed that you could so much for less without spending a lot. And even when we went to the show, can you imagine going to the show for 25¢, and sometimes it was a double feature. And some of our theaters in Iron Mountain at that time, we had one called the Bijou Theater, and bijou in French means jewel. Of course that was an old theater, in

fact, later when they abandoned it for a theater, it was used for a church for a while. When the church of St. Joseph burnt down which was about the year 1929 or 1930, the people used the Bijou Theater for a church on Sundays. I can remember going there. In fact, I used to teach catechism in those days and I can remember teaching the children there. There was also the Colonial Theater, and that was supposed to be the theater after the Bijou. Of course it was great. For a quarter you'd see two shows, double features. Not the days of TV. That was our TV at that particular time. Then later on when they built the Bramah Theater, oh, we thought that was the greatest thing that could happen to Iron Mountain. So when they abandoned the Bijou, and we had the Colonial and the Brahmah and that was fairly good, two theaters in the town. So, when boys and girls, the young used to go they had to go most of the time, it was called dutch treat. The girls would pay for their own and the boys would pay for their own, because who had money in those days? Nobody had very much, you shared what you had. Some of our ethnic groups who did come here in the time, if they had a little money when conditions were so bad during the depression years, they went back to Italy. We saw that not just from Italy alone, we saw that from other groups. If they had a little money, they decided to go back home, and they did, because conditions were very bad. The mines were still running, but not very well. Finally 1939 came around and we saw the condition of the war. Things began

to improve around Iron Mountain too, because with war, the Ford company started to manufacture parts of planes, the mines were going full blast, the lumbering was great. All this encouraged during war time. Conditions started to get better in Iron Mountain with war. It's a shame that a war has to come along to better conditions in the community. But it did and things started to go up, so we go out of depression because of the war years. About this time in 1939 is when I was married and I left Iron Mountain for about 25 years. I suppose I should end it there until I came back later.

Flora Fregerio: Mrs. Klien, would you tell us about the cessation of the mining operations, what brought it about, and also something about the Chapin pit which I understand resulted because of the Chapin mine which was sunk very near to it.

A.K.: I can remember living in Perkins. I used to come home very often. My husband was district manager at that time in a district for the Wisconsin Michigan Power Co. He held this job for over thirty years. The mines kept running but little by little the mining kept going down. One of the reasons mining was going down, the iron ore that was coming out of the mines was a low grade, and it was too expensive to mine, so little by little the mines were going down as far as operation. Finally it was abandoned. I was trying to recall the year. Perhaps in the early 50s. You might find it in the historical ledger. When the mine was closed completely, it's been said that there's an underground river, but there's a lot of water down there. For a long time,

the city began to pay for the pumping. There were pumps there which were pumping the water. A lot of the water that was pumped out of the mine was sent down to Crystal Lake and to Mud Lake. In fact, when I was a young girl, Crystal Lake was a beautiful Lake for swimming.They had a bathhouse down there and there were different things, it was a great area for swiming. It wasn't as you see it today. So the water was being pumped down there, and besides, they also used the water for drinking water. Finally it got to a place in time where Iron Mountain decided it was too expensive to pump the water out of Chapin mine any more. So we had going across what we call now, the road going across Chapin Pit.On both sides of that road, there was a deep chasm, a gully, and in fact, ashamed to say it, it was a dumping pit. It was full of cans in those days. I can remember the young kids sitting on the side of it with guns and they used to shoot the rats off as they came out of there, so it was a completely dumping area, nothing else. Now, here we have the city, deciding they are not going to run those water pumps any more. So they quit the water pumps. When they quit the water pumps, the water from this underground source rose in the mine through all the levels. There were many levels in that mine, and after it filled the levels, here after all, if you have a hole somewhere,the water's going to go, so it filled up that Chapin Pit. In fact, it has been said that pit is 90 ft. deep. But finally, the road itself was not in very good condition. They should have repaired the road, to

see this coming. But they didn't. They didn't look forward enough. All of a sudden, you'll have to check the date, the water undermined the road. When some cars were going across the road went down in there, and some people , they didn't lose their lives, some of the cars went in. The water in the pit was a direct result of the pumps being shut down in the mine. And now we have almost like two lakes there to replace the dumping grounds that we had back in the 20s and 30s.

F.F.: When did the city decide to clean up this area and get rid of all the things that were put into it?

A.K.: The cans were never rid of, they're still there on the bottom. Never got rid of it. It's just that the water rose, and the cans are still on the bottom. As far as cleaning up the area, the area was never cleaned up. The minute the pumps were closed, the water rose and it formed the two lakes. The only thing that was at fault, I think they should have watched as far as the repairing of the road. After the cars went in, then they repaired the road, and they're still keeping an eye on it. 'Cause they are not sure whether that area will ever get undermined. In fact, it has been said that the Chapin mine has undermined Iron Mountain, way as far as I live in the 1000 block. They said the whole area is undermined. We knew that the north side is undermined, 'cause for a good long time every once in a while, any of the houses closest to the Chapin Pit were sinking into the pit because of the fact that the area was undermined. There had been no way of shoring up the houses at all.

F.F.: How deep were these mines?

A.K.: As far as level, that I don't really know, because it's something when I was very young. I forget how many levels they had. By the way,when you go down into the mines, they didn't have electricity and what not they have now. The miners had hats, but on the hats they had candles. The candles were lit. And then of course they had to take their lunch down there. And many times before they went down in the mines, they would put canaries down to make sure the air was all right, because they never were sure if things would be OK. Even the lifts that would go up and down like we think of the elevators. They aren't like the elevators of this day and age. They were lifts mostly on pulleys that were going down into the mines and they in themselves were very dangerous. Then when the miners came out of the mine, they were so dirty with that iron ore rust. They did have a spot in an old mining house which exists today. It's an antique shop across the pit and there they would use it where they could wash themselves off so they'd be a little clean before they came home so they wouldn't carry that iron rust home with them. But if you think of the fact that they went down with candles, how dark it must have been to spend, dark and damp all that time in that mine because there was all that running water. In fact, I would sak anybody, they would go down into the Vulcan Mine. 'Course you have to remember that a Vulcan Mine that you visithas got electricity which they didn't have much in those days. That's really a little bit more modern, but it will give you an idea what mining is like.

F.F.: Do you recall many accidents in these mines?

A.K.: You know as far as the Chapin mine itself, I can't really recall any accidents. Looking back at the ones you do hear about, like you have that one that's close to Vulcan, where there were several people that were sealed in the mine there, that was their permanent tomb. All of a sudden the mine caved in. As far as within the area of Iron Mountain, I can't racall any serious accidents. You know those days, they got what was called miners consumption. Actually it was a silicosis, I think that was the expression you'd use. In fact, my sister in law's father who had been a mining captain died of that. That was typical of one of the diseases that they had in those days, because you couldn't be that long time in the mine without something: either a severe case of rheumatism, because that dampness would hit you, or...