

An interview with Anthony Wyszynski at his home in Montreal, Wisconsin on March 18, 1989. Mr. Wyszynski is age 77 and was an employee at the Oglebay and Norton iron ore mine in Montreal, Wisconsin.

Narr. Mr. Wyszynski during what years did you work at the Montreal Mine?

Anthony Wyszynski. I started in May, 1942 and worked until the mine closed in 1962 in August.

Narr. How organized was labor in the mine during the years that you worked there?

A.W. When I first started at the mine the Steel Workers was the union. But they were not organized until a closed shop was achieved.

Narr. Can you recall any major strikes while you worked at the mine?

A.W. Well, there was a strike in 1949, and another in 1953, and one in 1959. The longest strike was about four months. When they striked in 1949 certain employees were allowed to stay underground to maintain it, and after the 1949 strike the union demanded that no labor was allowed to work underground to maintain it for the company's benefit.

Narr. What did management do when the union made this demand?

A.W. Management kept the pumps going to keep the water out of the mine. They also kept the air circulation systems going.

Narr. Do you recall what the purpose for the strikes was?

A.W. Well, they brought up the hourly wage. In 1942 when I started working at the mine the base wage was \$6.28 per day. The employees got more benefits including: sick benefits and insurance.

Narr. Was safety ever a factor that the miners wanted better safety conditions?

A.W. Yes, safety conditions were a factor.

Narr. Was Oglebay and Norton really concerned about the safety conditions in their mine?

A.W. Yes they were. They made sure that there was proper ventilation underground. Air was pulled out through one shaft and went out through another shaft.

Narr. Back on the topic of strikes, were they just of a local nature?

A.W. It was a nationwide strike. The steel mills and all went out at the same time. The steel mills settled first.

Narr. Were any of the strikes violent, and was the community involved?

A.W. There was little if any picketing involved. No, there was no violence.

Narr. At the time of the strike did the mines own your home?

A.W. The mine owned company homes. Those of us that owned our own homes had them on property which the mine owned.

Narr. Did the mine own any stores?

A.W. I cannot recall any mine owned stores.

Narr. Before the union became really strong, can you recall the use of black lists?

A.W. No, I don't think there was any blackballing unless they did something wrong at the mine they would put you on the black list. But outside of that, men went from one mine to another where ever they felt they were treated better.

Narr. Were you working the regular 8 hour shift then?

A.W. Yes, I was working eight hour days, five days a week. And when the union came in eight hours was from the time you left surface until you came back. It was called portal to portal pay.

Narr. What kind of activities were there for the families of the miners?

A.W. The mining company owned a building called the Hamilton Club. They had bowling alleys, pool tables and a soda fountain there. They also had a meeting room and in the evenings the mining company employed someone to have a recreation room for the children of the town.

Narr. Were most of these activities free of charge?

A.W. Most of the activities were free of charge, except for bowling, pool, etc.

Narr. Was the Hamilton Club open only to employees?

A.W. Anyone could go there whether they were employees or not.

Narr. Exactly what type of work did you do in the mine?

A.W. Everyone in the mine started on what was called the stations, where they ore came from inside the mine and was dumped into pockets. From the pockets it was loaded into a skip and sent to the surface. When you started on station it was your job to break up the bigger pieces so that they would go through the drill and into the pocket. And then after everyone worked for so long they were given the opportunity to take jobs in mining.

There were electricians and pipemen to pipe water and air into the mining places. And there was a man that was called the trackman. It was his job to put new track into places that were being developed. Timebermen would deliver the timber and lagging to the places where it was needed.

After working on the station for about six months, then I went mining. I was mining about two years and then I got to be a trackman because there was alot of developing. Two of us working on the track had to put in new rails and keep the old track in shape. We had to bend our own rails for curves. And after I worked underground for about ten years I got a job on the surface as a welder in the shop. In there we rebuilt and made new things for the mine. Every year they had to repair the bucket for the steamshovel and rebuilt the lip with maganese. And then we made new ore cars for underground. They were cradle type ore cars. In the shop they sharpened the drills for underground. In the machine shop they machined all of the parts. An electrician shop took care of the electrical work in the mine. They rewound the motors and replaced motors.

Men in the engine house were called hoistmen. There were men underground that were called skip tenders who loaded the skip to send to the surface. And then was the cage tender, who's job it was to transport the men up and down and bring materials underground.

Narr. Did they process the ore at the mine in a processing plant?

A.W. After the ore got to the surface then it went to a crusher. Then if it was summer time the ore was loaded directly into ore cars and hauled to Ashland. In the wintertime they stockpiled it. Different grades of ore went into different stockpiles. And the rock was brought out on a different tressle.

Narr. Did all the mines locally, excluding the Oglebay Norton in Montreal process their own ore?

A.W. They did the same as Montreal did. They crushed it when it came to surface and it was shipped raw from there. They had a shipping season that started in May and lasted until November.

Narr. How would you compare the output in tons of ore between the Montreal and other local mines?

A.W. Montreal was the biggest producing mine in the area.

Narr. Were the other local mines owned by Oglebay and Norton?

A.W. No, some of them were owned by the Oliver Mining Co. which is a subsidiary of U.S. Steel. Some were owned by Hanna.

Narr. How were the wages of the other mines compared to the Montreal?

A.W. Well, the wages were practically the same. Alot of the work underground was done on an incentive basis. The more footage you got, the more wages you got. It was in developing by driving new drifts or crosscuts. And there was an incentive for the amount of ore that came out of your place.

Narr. Was that an incentive just for those working underground, or all miners?

A.W. No, it was just an incentive for those working underground.

Narr. Can you remember any cave ins or accidents at the mine?

- A.W. Yes, there was about one or two a year, but nothing real bad. In one accident two men got killed, that was the biggest accident. Outside of that it was just a single accident.
- Narr. How did labor strenght influence the politics of the area with the mine?
- A.W. Well, when the mine was operating, the mine operated the city. Most of the men that were on the city council were employees of the mining company. Politics, well it was in 1959 that John F. Kennedy came around N. Wisconsin and stopped at the mine and greeted all of the miners. And in one year Hubert Humphrey came to the mine. But as far as local politics, local politicians for county office would come there and just pass out cards prior to election time.
- Narr. Were alot of the local office holders in administrative positions at the mine?
- A.W. The mayor was safety director at the mine, and after he left the chief engineer got to be the mayor. Most of the members of the city council were higher ups in the mining company. Some were just underground foremen, but the upper crust was handled by the mining company itself. The treasurer, clerk, and mayor were all higher ups in the mine office.
- Narr. Did the mine run the schools?
- A.W. No, the school district operated the schools. But several mining officials were on the school board.
- Narr. Was there any corruption because of the fact that mining officials held these political offices?
- A.W. I wouldn't know about the corruption part of it, but they were in a position that you could cause a problem if you ran against them.
- Narr. Who ran the public safety?
- A.W. The city had cops of its own, but that was through the mining company because the company was paying the biggest part of the taxes. And after the war broke out in 1941, then in 1943 the mining company had an officer on duty also.
- Narr. When the second world war broke out, what was its impact on this area as related to the mine?
- A.W. Alot of people were hired in 1941-42. It wasn't difficult to get a job as it was prior to 1941.
- Narr. Were women employed by the mining company?
- A.W. Only in the offices.
- Narr. Were most of the mining administrators from the local area or brought in by the company.
- A.W. They were brought in by the mining company. Alot of the men such as the

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superintendent were from Crystal Falls and Iron River.

Narr. In your opinion what brought about the close of the mine?

A.W. The mine closed in Aug. 1962. And I think that the big concern was when taconite came out. It was too expensive to mine ore and ship the raw ore to the mills because there is too much waste in raw iron ore.

Narr. Did you as an employee of the mine know that the mine was going to close as soon as it did?

A.W. Well, it was a shock in a way because they thought it would last longer than it did. It could have lasted longer if it wasn't for the taconite process.

Narr. Did labor have any influence on the closing of the mine?

A.W. Well I think the demands of the union forced the hand a little bit. But the hourly rate at the mine when it closed as far as the top rate was 3.35 per hour.

Narr. Was that a comparatively high wage for the times?

A.W. Well in this area it was.

Narr. Could you describe what happened to the community when the mine closed?

A.W. The mine closed in August, and alot of people left Montreal in September and October. Alot went to Kenosha, Wisconsin to work for American Motors.

Narr. Did the rest of the mines in the area close up because of the grade of ore?

A.W. The grade of ore was low, but the taconite process had alot to do with that. I believe there was only one mine, the Peterson which operated two years longer than the Montreal.

Narr. Did the mining company give any employees the chance to relocate to a different mine?

A.W. The higher ups in the office went to Eveleth, Minn. where Oglebay Norton operated a pellet plant. Most of the people with authority at the Montreal Mine went up there.

Narr. What did the mine leave the employees if anything?

A.W. All they had to look forward to was a pension fund when they reached 60 years of age. And they gave the employees an opportunity to buy the homes they lived in. But most of the homes at that time were bought up by a Mr. Gailbreth from Cleveland. Then he individually sold the homes to the people. But the home that you live in you had the first opportunity to buy it. The price for the homes was approximately \$2600.

Narr. When the unions came in was there going to be a retirement program, and was it seen that the mine was going to be around long enough to receive a pension?

A.W. Prior to the union I don't recall any pension plan. After the union came in and organized there was an insurance and pension plan. Before that there was no insurance because the mine had its own doctors. When you had a problem there was no charge for family members to see the doctor. The union was the one that forced the pension plan on to the mine like they did elsewhere.

Narr. Was there a certain number of years you had to work before you could retire?

A.W. There was no set number of years. Most wouldn't retire until after age 65. But you were eligible for a mining company pension at age 60, providing you had more than 15 years of service. You received so much for every month that you worked, towards your pension plan. If you were over 55 you received a larger pension because the union demanded a higher pension for those over 55. And that was probably part of the problem the mine shut down because there was so many men in the age 50-55 bracket that if, they would have operated much longer, the pension plan would have been that much costlier to them.

Narr. So in your opinion that is part of the reason that the mining company decided to leave?

A.W. Yes, but with the taconite coming in that was also a big help for the mining company.

Narr. At the time the mine closed was other employment hard to find in the area?

A.W. Well, there was no other employment around unless you worked for the county. And the lumber industry was on its way out.