

TAPE #31

FRANK LIDDICOAT

Taped: April 1979

Subject: The mines of Amador County

(Pick a mine you remember well, and let's talk about it.)

It would be either the Central Eureka or the Argonaut. Or the Kennedy or the Plymouth Mine.

I think I worked the longest in the Central Eureka. That's the one my father got killed in.

(Were you living here then?)

Yes.

(What time did you get up in the morning?)

~~It~~ Oh, about 5 o'clock. They had whistles that blew, and this let you know to get up. The whistle from the Central Eureka is over at the American Forest sawmill now.

(What did you have for breakfast?)

Hotcakes or hash brown potatoes. We had our own cows, so we had our own cream.

(When did you have to be at the mine?)

The first skip went down at seven, but I was a skip-tender and they had 7 to 3, 3 to 11 and 11 to 7.

(Did you also work down in the mine?)

Yes, I was jigger boss.

(But back to being a skip-tender. What was your job?)

My job was to take care of the supplies that came down in the mine, hoist the rock out of the mine; that was my job, to load the skips. There were two skips, and I had to take care of them.

(How many levels were in the Central Eureka?)

There was a level about every hundred and fifty feet.

(How many men were on the crew?)

About fifty up here. That would be two shifts; the day and night shifts. I finally got promoted to a straight day shift.

I was the head skip-tender.

The miners would go down in the morning and either put a set of timber in or start it. The actual miners, we called them machine men, drilled the rock, and about a half hour before it was time to go up they would blast. Everybody had to get out of the stopes. If they didn't they would get killed. In all maybe 15 or twenty boxes of powder was set off.

(Where would the men go; to the end of the drift?)

No! There was big workings down there. Like Jackson over there; from the Kennedy and the Argonaut the entire town is undermined. It's all stoped out and open. What they would do, when they'd take the rock out of the mine they'd drill holes in the hanging and fill up behind them. So when they go up it won't cave in. That takes care of it. They'd take out one floor, and a floor is 8 feet. They'd blast up above, and that would fill the lower one. It would go clear down into the drift on the level that happened to be below it. So when they would take all the rock out of that one, they would start filling up behind them.

(How wide would a stope be?)

All depends how wide the ledge is. Some places it's 20 feet; other places it's 40 or 50! All depends how big the vein is.

And where the skip comes down; that's called a station. It's as big as this house. And that's where all the rock comes to before it's hauled up. The rock is dumped in a shute, and the ~~shute~~ shute dumps the rock into the skip. When the skip was full, it took about fifteen minutes for it to surface in the Central Eureka. In other words you would get a skip load of rock every fifteen minutes.

(How did you get your lunch?)

Up in the timber shed you had a place to put your bucket. The skip tender would get them, and he would bring them down. You didn't touch your bucket. It was put on what we called a dinky (a little skip), and the skip tender send them to where the men were. The men would eat, and then put the buckets back by the station. Then they would be loaded back on the skip and sent up on top. You wern't allowed to move your bucket, because the men used to put hi-grade in the buckets. The buckets were round, and they had three compartments. One was for coffee, another for sandwiches, and the top one for desert.

(What can you tell me about the "change room" that the mines had?)

Most of the mines had a double change room. You took all your street clothes off---you could take a knife with you and some personal things, because they wern't too concerned with what you took down, it was what you brought back up that worried them. Anyway, you'd put your clothes in one room, walk down a corridor and go into the other room that had your work clothes in it. A guard would check what personal stuff you wanted to take with you, and then you went

out and down into the mine. Then, when your shift was over, you came back up, took off your work clothes, showered and changed into your other clothes. That way you couldn't take out any hi-grade. But some of the men still got away with it. I was jigger boss for quite a while.

(What is that?)

I was in charge of the gold. I handled all the gold on my shift. And it was the real stuff; all of it hi-grade!

(What happened to the gold when it left the mine?)

The mill would take care of that. It was right at the mine. The skip would surface and dump the ore into these cars. Then the cars went a couple of hundred feet and dumped the ore into the mill. From the mill it went down into the stamps and was crushed. That's when the separation process began.

(How was quicksilver used?)

It would stick to the gold. And this would bunch it. We had a mine below Georgetown. It was the Liddicoat Mine, and the largest nugget in existence came out of it. It's in the Ferry Building in San Francisco now! No, that's where it was; it's in the old San Francisco Mint now. It's shaped like a boomerang. But working in the mines was real terrible for your health. I've got spots on my lungs that I'll never get rid of.

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(Was Sutter Creek as wide open as Jackson?)

It was open, but it was nothing like Jackson. This one guy, Steve Locutt, he thought he was a slicker. Anyway, one day this guy came to town, and he was dressed like a common miner. He fiddled at the mine.

He didn't want a job; he was just rustling around at the mine. But he'd come to town at night and get in a gambling game. He took about 2 or 3 thousand dollars in one night from Steve Locutt. After that, you didn't hear too much about Steve being a big time gambler. That guy beat him at his own game. Steve had marked cards, and this guy was reading Steve's own marks!

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The English people who were working the mines moved out of here and up to Grass Valley.

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You know, the owners of the mines, they got 22 dollars an ounce for the gold; the miners, if they bootlegged it, got about 8 or 10 dollars an ounce. Towards the last they were gettin 12. The miners had their gold all ready to go, and then the owners would buy it back! The miners were milling it and making a finished product out of it. And they were doing it cheaper than the mine could mill it, so the owners would buy from them! So they were buying their own gold and making a profit on the deal'. They were making money on the gold that they didn't even have to touch. What a racket; that's why in the early days the mines wern't so rough on em.

One Spanish guy, he lived up on the ridge, he had a horse and buggy. Well, the miners would mill their rock up at his place and sell it to this Spaniard. Well, this man had a big family and he never put on airs. He always looked like a mucker, or like some poor fella with a bunch of kids. Anyway, he'd load his buggy with hi-grade and go to Frisco. He sold it to the Mint and probably made a fortune.

(How did they make off with the ore?)

Most of the miners carried it off in socks hung over their necks and under their jumpers.

One guy had a great big watch. Nearly as big as an alarm clock. He took all the guts out of it. The hands were still on it, but if anybody asked the time he couldn't tell you. But he would work like Hell and then take time to pound up the pure stuff and jam it in his watch case. He take a watch case full out a day. And they never did catch him! They never did smell a rat. You couldn't keep a thing like that from the miners themselves, but they're a pretty close mouthed lot. The only way it would ever get out would be if there was a stool pidgeon. And if you ever found one you got rid of him. My dad was a shift boss and a jigger boss. I think he found someone stealing gold. He was gonna quit and go up in the mountains, but he was killed in the mine. Someone told me it was the skip tenders fault.

(Were Chinese ever working in the deep mines?)

Chinese, no. But we had a few Indians. Had a couple of Negros too; one of them was a red-head. But no Chinamen; they'd work the creeks. They tried to run the Chinese out of the County at one time. Edwina---I used to chumb with a Chinese girl here in town.

Frank\*\*--I remember the Chinese laundry here.

(Where was that?)

You know where the Standard Station is? It was behind that. They called it the ditch. It was right over the creek.

The Chinese they had here were good people. They wouldn't let anyone go hungry. If you were on the tramp, boy, they'd feed you.

They had a restaurant, you see. All you had to do was say you were broke.

And it wouldn't be just leftovers; you'd eat like everyone else!  
It was on the left hand side where Lew Walker lived. The Gallina's  
built it up into a home. I'd sure like to see them again.