

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LETT

Fr: Beth Nogay:

Nogay: How old were you when you first began to work in the mines.

Lett: I was 12 years old. In the beginning it was to build water in the tunnel at the Raymond City Coal Company.

Nogay: How did you do that?

Lett: We had water boxes to haul the water out and they held 2 or 3 hundred gallons of water and I was little and I got into the sump hole and handed up 2½ gal cans and my brother would dump it into the box and that was my beginning.

Nogay: How long did you work and what was it like in the mines?

Lett: We worked from 8 to 12 hours a day...night work.

Nogay: Tell me what a typical day was like.

Lett: A typical day on day shift we got up at 5 o'clock and eat breakfast we wore overalls and jackets and heavy shoes and go down the hollow about a mile and they had a man trip that came up that pulled 26 to 30 cars and that took the men through the tunnel to the mines and we had to be there to catch the mantrip at 6:15 and started at the mines at 7:00 and then in the evenings we left around 4:30 to 5:00.

Nogay: What did you do about school?

Lett: I went to school some. and sometimes the truant officer came to see why I didn't come to school and my father paid fines so I could work.

Nogay: What kind of money were you paid and how were you paid?

Lett: Money was paid to my father on payroll. They paid me what they paid the men as long as I was doing a mans job.

Nogay: Were there other boys in the mines?

Lett: Not as young as me.

Nogay: Tell me what your house looked like.

Lett: It was a three room house our kitchen my mother had a big warm morning coal stove to cook on and a fireplace in the kitchen and we all stayed in the kitchen when it was cold because that was the warmest place in the house . Sometimes the three boys slept together. We had two to three beds in one bedroom and there was 5 of us boys and my father had some hired hands and they slept in there too. One to three hired hands.

Nogay: Tell me some more about what the house looked like.

Lett: Wood. Built of rough lumber. Inside was papered. Outside they used 3" strips to patch the cracks not too good. The wind would blow in through the cracks and tear the paper.

Nogay: What did your neighborhood look like?

Lett: No grass. Well (hand dug) 23 or 25 ft. deep.

Nogay: What did you do for plumbing and how many houses were there?

Lett: Plumbing....none plumbed except the White House where the General Manager lived at that time. No working men had plumbing.

Nogay: How many houses were there in the neighborhood.

Lett: I don't know. I saw in pictures that there were around 300 miners. So you could figure all in all ... these were miners that dug coal. There were carpenters and men who worked at the river tipple so I imagine that they had around 200 houses.

Nogay: You talk about the White House.

Lett: We thought it was a mansion. Otto Remlin was the General Manager and we were afraid of him. He was a scream and what he said went but it was beautiful and right on Kanawha River and Poca River. Very beautiful.

Nogay: What was the company store like and how did you buy things?

Lett: The company store had everything in stock that we needed and we bought everything from the company store including suits of clothes and furniture all of our food if we needed fence for cows and horses they had hardware. They had everything needed. If you had death in the family they had casket little pine boxes that were used and we had burial committee, I thing we paid 25¢ a month and if one of our loved ones died there was a man came a saw where we wanted them buried.. the company had different plots for cemeteries. One was big Cherry and different places but Big Cherry was one of the main ones. They would dig the grave and put the body away with a little service. No church where we were. There were some colored churches but we didn't have any. Of course the colored people and we were all close together we had no trouble. We all just worked there for a living.

Nogay: How did you buy things at the company store?

Lett: We paid for the things by drawing script. The main office was right next to the store and you'd go get your groceries what ever the bill was and they'd give you a bill and you went to the office window and they would give you amount of script for what ever your bill was and that was taken out of your pay. And if alot of men didn't have enough in there to cover it then they couldn't get all they had bought they'd have to put some back .

Nogay: So the miners rarely saw money?

Lett: Very little. I remember one time that with all of us working, my dad had a contract getting mine timber for the company and us boys were working, some loading coal, some running machine and me I was bailing water and other things too he drawed a little too much money one time and the mine superintendent told him that the General Manger said to tell Simon Lett that he better do more at the store or else he would have not much work. They didn't want you to draw very much money. It was allright to bill a few dollars but most didn't draw hardly anything.

Nogay: Have you heard the store you owe your soul to the company store?

Is that what it was really like?

Lett: Just about. We never knew anything but hard work and we thought that was the way of live. It didn't bother us.

Nogay: Were the prices high at the company store?

Lett: They was a little higher than most places but not too much higher.

Nogay: Would the miners ever feel presurred into going to the company store?

Lett: No not as far as I know of.

Nogay: What did you do for food? Did you have a garden?

Lett: We were raised on beans and potatoes but my mother ... we raised hogs and we had lots of pork and sausage and cows... we had milk and butter we ate well. We had our own chickens and eggs.

Nogay: What do you remember about inside the house?

Lett: We had... I never remember us having any beds with any wooden fronts or anything it was just iron or brass. The furniture was very poor and the straw bottom chairs and large table.

Nogay: What did you do for fun? How did you boys play?

Lett: When we had a chance to play we played in the hollow and pass ball and climb trees and ride grape vines and things like that but we didn't play much. We worked. We didn't only work one shift but when we finished one shift we went to something else. Because dad was a contractor and had lots of work going.

Nogay: How many worked in your family.

Lett: There were four boys and my day but he didn't work much after I went to work. He spent his time gone somewhere but he seen to it that we worked.

Nogay: So you were working when your father wasn't.

Lett: Yes.

Nogay: How did you feel about that?

Lett: What could I feel,, I just worked. You couldn't realize because I was young but we thought that was life.

Nogay: Did your mother sew?

Lett: Mom didn't sew...we bought our clothes at the company store. They had all we needed at the store. Mom raised a garden and raised hogs and chickens and I don't know if my dad was ever in the garden she canned picked berries and canned berries and made jelly and lots of it. She put it up in  $\frac{1}{2}$  gallon jars. If my father had been what my mother was we could have owned the company.

Nogay: Do you remember the mules in the mines?

Lett: The mules weighed 750 to 900 lbs. I worked a team of mules I drove a team of mules that were small 650 to 700 lbs. Shotgun Kate... I worked them in a spike team one in front of the other. They got to know my voice they knew right and left it was amazing and I loved it. I loved to drive the mules.

Nogay: Tell me as if you were doing it again what it means to drive the mules.

Lett: Just to become part of them and learn how to talk to them and they know when your good to them and they know when you speak to them and mean it. I would love to have a team now. I think that was the greatest joy of my work at the mines was driving mules. I drove them on a slate dump and I hauled the gob out of a main entry that they cleaned up to make a main line and I had two dump cars...I had a little side car I'd pull an empty and get the loaded car and when I'd pass the side car and the men would come out and shove it out and load it and that's the way we did it. I wasn't big enough to shove the car and I had a hook on the side of the car and they'd pull it back on the side track and I never had to speak to the mules they knew what to do...you know arter I trained them the learned how and I remember one time the big boss came up to where I was dumping tne slate over in this hollow and I had to chain the car to the rail because it was so heavy that when I would go over the side dump it would have throwed it over the hill and he came out to help me and if the didn't load it good on the right side it was hard to dump. When he came out to help me instead of me helping him lift it I held down on it and he went in and got on those men I don't know how that youngin's dumping that...you load that on that side. I told him about it years later and he said did you do me that way. Tha t was the only way I knew to get you to make them men load that car heavy on the other side. But it was such a joy. I enjoyed it, I didn't

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know there was anything wrong with working hard. Working night and day and now going to school. When I was at school that's where my mind was at the mines.

Nogay: Did the other men feel that this was the way it was and did they ever talk about it about working?

Lett: They didn't talk about how long they had to work without pay. We wasn;t allowed to talk about that. There was one time if three men got together the big boss would tell them better break it up. We wasn't allowed to get together very much to...working overtime we had so much they paid us a day our wages the less that I can remember I mean for a man's wages they had boys wages for boys that trapped and things like that were lower. \$2.36 a day for 10 to 11 hours and the highest then was \$2.76 that is the way the wages varied. I worked with some of the finest men every man I worked with was better to me and my day and they loved me and watched over me I was a man when I was 14 and doing anything they asked me running the motor and driving mules and doing whatever they asked me.

Nogay: Talking about the men and how they felt about the work...What happened when the union started coming in.

LEtt: When we organized in 1932 my brother and I ... I ran a main line motor and my brother hauled the coal out of the mine out to where I got it and took it to the river which was about a 5mile run but anyway I remember very well the night we met and organized the next day we were on our noon hour and we didn't get any pay you just ate with a sandwich in your hand and my brother pulled down the empty trip and I went down to the loaded trip and he didn't tear the road so I could get going. He stopped his motor and he and his helper breakman got up on the motor and set down and started to eat their lunch and the mine superintendent came out and whistled at him and give him a highball and he said were going to eat our lunch Mr. Ott said we met and organized last night and we are going to eat out lunch. The president had give us a right to organize and he came back past my motor and he met the superintendent of the electricians which was Kiley Snell and he said to Snell they've got us and I'm glad of it and he went on in and pulled the general manager Otto Remlin and told him what we were doing and he said to tell them to run their noon hour and we will pay them. And we started making money from them on and we got paid for all overtime.

That was...we had alot of trouble I wouldn't go into about the strike but they never did close the mines down they had guards then and state police

Nogay: I would like to talk a little bit about that. What would the company do to stop people from getting involved with the union?

Lett: If they tried to close down and block the men from going to work they had to call the state police...I've seen state police all over the yard there and they'd tell them to clear out and they meant it.

Nogay: Do you remember the Baldwin Phelps Agent?

Lett: That was in the other mines but I remember them talking about it but I didn't know anything about that.

Nogay: Do you remember miners ever being kicked out of their homes?

Lett: Yes. What happened when a man refused to work when they were on a strike they gave him a notice to either go back to work or vacate his house to get out of it and they gave him so long 10 days or whatever. But if he didn't move then the company sent two or three men and they were generally a law officer or constible and they moved and set their stuff out on the side of the road where ... I saw that happen.

Nogay: What would it have looked like?

Lett: It always made you sad at heart to know that people had to move and you always new the people and they were working for little or nothing buy yet they had to work. I never was happy to see anyone mistreated I never had that kind of heart I'd like to tell you about the mine superintendent...one time a man got fired for fighting in the mines an that's when I was driving the little mules and he was out with me and he watched me lots he was fascinated with the way the mules would mind me so the poor man had been oif for two or three months and he didn't have any work and he had a family and they were going to put him out of his house and he came up to the mine superintendent and told him he was sorry for what he done and asked him for his job back and he told him he couldn't because the big boss won't let me. And when he

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started off I just walked up to him I must have been 12 or 13 I said I though you was the boss here. I said why don't you give that poor man his job back? And he said what have you got to do with it? I said don't you have any heart I said what would you have done if Jeff Casto would have done you like he done him? He said I'd a killed him. And I said yeah and he just only whopped him I said he don't have any work and he's got a family and he whistled for him t come back and put him back to work. That's when they began to listen even when I was a kid I always new right from wrong and I wouldn't trade that for every diploma in every college in this country. I think thats the greatest need in our life is to know those things.

Nogay: How did the company feel about the men who worked for them?

Lett: They treated them allright as long as they did what they told them. If they didn't they answered the consequences...they'd fire them or put them out of their house or whatever they could.

Nogay: Did the company influence other areas of your life...who you voted for? or what you were taught in school or your doctors.

Lett: No we had ...the one time they talked to us about...but they never used any of their power to influence who to vote for they would ask and put up notices but they didn't use any influence or their authority as to who to vote for.

Nogay: How did you feel when you saw the furniture when you came home..did it make you feel like you had to do what you were told.

Lett: My mother held us together and she'd would always tell us that was what we had to do and she has told me she never worried about us not doing right but of course we didn't always do right you know boys but all in all we never worried her. The only thing she worried about was if we would get killed. in the mines.

Nogay: Were there alot of accidents in the mines.

Lett: Yes there were.

Nogay: What kind of accidents?

Lett: Well slate would fall on men and kill them. Some got in the wire... one man who was 17 was getting out of the mantrip one evening



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and struck the trolley wire which was 550 volts and it killed him. They carried him home and when his parents saw him along ways off somebody went ahead and told them and they was screaming.

Nogay: How did the community and the other miners feel when there was a death?

Lett: Well they would all be concerned..everybody would always have kind words and as I said we had a burial committee that took care of it. No cost another thing we had that was good at the mines and I reckon you could say that's what that song meant we owed our souls to the company store we owed it to the company I suppose we had hospital insurance if we went to the hospital regardless of what they done to us there was no charge when we came out. ~~It was all paid...we paid a little sum into that but there were alot of good things we had as well as the things and I wouldn't trade what I know about and the experience I had and what I've learned for anything.~~

Nogay: Can you tell me what else would happen when did you begin to question things and maybe they shouldn't be just like they were?

Lett: There were two or three times that we tried to organize and that's the only way to have any say so was to organize and had a union contract. But they never could get up to that it always override it...if 50 men would quit there would be 100 standing down the road wanting a job. But when they organized and give a right to organize that's when you had a right to stop and eat your lunch and all of those things. Course if they paid you you were willing to go on and work with one hand and eat with the other. We never felt that we ever had any priviledges we just worked and did what they told us. I'd like to share with you my two brothers was loading coal in the mines and I was working on the slate dump and they ...the whole company would work Monday and on Tuesday they called it blocking up all the cars were empty and if men would go in and load those cars they could have all they wanted they take their own mule and haul the coal to the pardon where the motor would pick it up the next morning but I would go to the slate dump at 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning and dump of those cars so my brothers could have them to load coal in and they got three days without any overhead just a skeleton crew. They get three days of the coal almost free. I dumped the slate...that was free and my brothers took the mule in the mines and hauled it. Lots of men did that.

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Nogay: What kind of work weeks would you have? and how many hours a day did you work?

Lett: Well we started at 7:00 and we was supposed to quit at 3:00 to 3:30 but sometimes it would be dark at 6 and 6:30 and you got 8 hrs. pay.

Nogay: Why did you work without overtime pay. Why didn't you quit?

Lett: Because they'd have fired you and you couldn't quit you had to live. And somebody would have taken your job,, maybe not done it as well but somebody would have taken it.

Nogay: Were you closely watched while working?

Lett: Yes I had one old mine foreman who was something else...he was all over those mines and stop watching and somedays he would walk 22 miles but he was the foreman and he knew what was going on.

Nogay: What about the mine boss who lived in the White House. What did you think of him.

Lett: I just thought he was the boss and he belonged there and I belonged where I was. That's the way I felt. I guess I was always thankful for what I had.

Nogay: Do you remember any thing about the house. Just 4 rooms..one kitchen and the other rooms where you slept.

Lett: Yes. One was a kitchen and the other three was used for sleeping and to live in because my sisters had to have a room and then my father and mother and all of us boys had the back bedroom. Later in life we built us a house down below the house and we had a bathtub in there and we had to heat the water to take our baths in and that was our place to sleep and mom would come down and wake us up and maybe sometimes we'd just got in bed and I remember one time my brother threwed a bucket of cold water on me to wake me. When you worked day and night and you was young you was asleep before you hit the bed. I'd like to have that sleep again. I've said sometimes Lord just make me a child again for the night.

Nogay: Did the other people feel the way you did that you were just glad for what you had?

Lett: Most did. Yes. If anybody griped and complained they didn't stay too long.

Nogay: Any other stories you'd like to tell us about?

Lett: We hauled people through this mine from Coal Hollow to Hermans Creek to different coal camps and there was a tunnel ...that tunnel was where we bailed the water but people traveled through this tunnel. One time there was a couple old man Buck Weatherow and his wife who were old fashioned people and I took them through that tunnel with a large train of empty cars and there was a big hill to go down and if you slowed those cars would bump up against you and it was dangerous and I was scared with those old people in the front car because if I had had a slate fall it would have gone down and mashed them. They sang and didn't know how dangerous it was and they had no fear. They both were white headed and about close to 80 years old. Little children rode through that tunnel. One day a lady and a little girl around 2 years old came through and it was a cold fall day and she was shivering and cold and I felt sorry for her and I had a sheeps wool overal jacket and I took that off and wrapped her up. Until she got through the tunnel on the other side and close to home. I rode on the front of the motor to the other side and there wasn't anything to break the air but I never regretted anything that I did but I thought so much about it and it is a miracle we didn't get somebody killed in there.

This is a safety light and the fireboss went into the mines around 3:00 in the morning to make a fire run and he tested for gas ... we had open lights that were dangerous explosives. He'd make his rounds and come out and stop the men from going in which we hardly ever did but if this light began to flicker there was danger of gas and he blocked that section of the mines until they cleared that whatever it took. I can remember those firebosses coming out with those little lanterns and those days were precious and they were young and paid no attention to going in all hours of the night. and alone.

We wore cloth caps when I first went in and we had carbide lamps like these then in the 30s we got the hard hats what the called the safety hats. These carbide lamps was all I knew until the last 3 or 4 years and they got battery lights.

Nogay: Can you remember the first time you went under ground. Were you scared?

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Lett: you know I never was scared. This large tunnel from Coal Hollow to Harmons Creek I've walked that all hours of the night by myself and alot of times I was afraid. They said they would always tell a story I don't know if there is anything to it. That the men would see lights and they never could see where they went. There wasn't anyplace to go But I have walked it when I was really afraid. I don't reckon there was an hour of the night that I didn't walk it.

Nogay: What was it like to be inside the mines back then. What did it feel like and smell like?

Lett: It generally smelled like powder because we shot the coal with black powder and it was dark as dungeons and if you had no light you couldn't see your hand before you. That's one place its pitch dark. You canno see anything. One night my dad sent me down into another room to get a shovel and I went and just before I got to the face of the coal there was a man lying dead in the middle of the track and smoke was so bad I couldn't see him until I got right up to him. He was a colored man. I ran back to my day which was  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a mile and the farther I ran the scarer I got. I told him there was a big man laying up ther and I thought he was dead but he had had a heart attack. I've had a lot of experiences.

Nogay: Was it cold and wet.

Lett: No. That was one good thing about the mine. I forget what the temperature was somewhere between 55 and 60 it never got any colder or hotter. That was a blessing to have a place like that to work.

Nogay: Did you socialize with the foreman or was there a line drawn between the two?

Lett: No. Only Mr. Remlin the General Manager outside of the there wasn't. They came to our house and ate with us and we never went to there house because we didn't go anywhere we worked. I know that's hard to believe but that's true. We worked. If I had life to live over I'd like a note of everything we did. One man I worked for on the Tipple was a fine old gentleman named Temasters he was so good to me and watched after me. I probably would have got killed.

If he hadn't watched after me.

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Nogay: What did you look like when you came home? Were you black with coal?

Lett: Oh yes. We washed in a #3 washtub that's what we took our bath in. If you were tired you could rest  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour and you was brand new again.

Nogay: What did the men look like when they came out of the mines?

Lett: They's black. Clean around your mouth kept clean by drinking water. My brother and I drove an entry is like coming down and what they called a strip to hold the roof up . Driving toward Black Betsy old coal mines and they were full of gas and we drilled 12 ft. hole size of a 50¢ piece and kept it ahead 12 ft. so we wouldn't shoot down and let it all in at once and they took brother off and put him on a machine he was 14 months older than I and I drilled that entry myself and I never did touch my lunch. I'd drink my water by 11 or 12 and never had time to eat. I loaded 4 cars of coal and a car of slate and drilled the hole. An old gentlemen watched me so they knew you came out at quitting time and he hollered for me when I wouldn't think it was quitting time and my clothes would be wet with sweat. My mother asked why I didn't eat and I'd say I didn't have time. Mem don't know nothing about working today.

Nogay: What did you eat in your lunch when you ate?

Lett: I'd have egg sandwich and pork, ham sausage apple butter. Maybe mom would bake a cake or something. Our dinner pails had a tray in the bottom and you put water in the bottom then your sandwiches and a tray in the top to put your cake or whatever in. There was a time I used a lard bucket for my lunch pail. And it just had one tray so I had to take water in something else. We didn't know any better we just knew to work.