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| Interviewee(s): David Spence (DS) | Interviewer(s): Unknown Female (UF) |
| Date of Interview: ? | Ref: EL2-32-1-1-T |
| REGION | East Lothian |
| TOWN | Musselburgh |

0h 00m 00s

DS: There were nae [?], ye know... and if some o these... uncles or aunts or something but two o them came frae Edinburgh. And a had tae damn well bath there, and them sitting, ye know, oh god, and I had no had a... [laughter] I can remember that yet. But at the top, ye ken, there'd be about a hundred [laughter] and they couldnae get them sticking tae the flair, they were... take a seat, James. They were aw [laughter]... aw round the room the... the wallpaper was sticking oot like this. James, they're wanting me tae talk. Ye'd better suspend now, girls. Just switch it off. [?] Well, am going back tae ma days, the first time I ever was on nightshift, wi ma father. Cause there was never repairers at night, then. He would do anything needed; he was the type that could do stonework and coal work and some bits o repairing or others. But anyway, this night. And we had always a piece-box. One big pocket on the left, inside, and a flask... of tea and of course, it was always cold tea. [laughter] Aw these years in the pit, cold tea. But this night, ma mother had been baking treacle scones, the girdle scones in the big quarters. And she was looking and she finally decided tae wrap them in paper so the... save much cutting tae fit the piece-box, ye see. So, they were away this night on the nightshift and the treacle scones were wrapped. Well, a was drawing off again but it was about one or two in the morning... and ye came out and your jackets were just laid anywhere, up where it was dry, no wardrobes or hooks [laughter]... unless ye'd a nail and put it... and I went tae ma jacket and these big pockets she had sewn on, laboriously, wi all the bits o auld jackets and breeks were kept for pockets and... never anything wasted in the house, ye know, the [?]... cause your clothes were heavy, heavy, and damaged easy.

0h 02m 30s

And the pocket was missing, the paper was missing and the treacle scones were missing [laughter]... and there were just threads round. And I says that was the night I never knew and I'd never seen and that's the night I knew there were rats in the pit. And they'd a feast that night [laughter].

UF: [laughter]

DS: So that... the one and only time the rats got David's piece. I was always careful. But twice, I did put ma jacket on at the end o a shift – twice, on separate occasions – and there was a rat up the sleeve [laughter]... asleep in it [laughter]. So, there was a lot of big ugly rats in pits in these days. And since not so many years ago, we've cleared them out o pits. Modern methods. And the last case I knew, was along at Prestonlinks, he lost his life tae that Weil's disease, [?] jaundice, and it's normally infectious wi rats urinating in old water or some infection such.

0h 04m 00s

But there was a case in the twenties, I think it was, in Tranent at the [?] pit, there was quite a few miners lost wi that same Weil's Disease. Or [?] jaundice. Weil was a... German. So, there was David's first knowledge o rats in pits and by God, there were some beauties at times.

[pause in recording]

DS: -in, I think it's '31. I was six years over there. The Wemyss Coal Company. And going from the thin seams o East Lothian... cause all the years up tae then, a never was off ma knees on coalfaces, used ma hands and knees. And there was this thick, [?] seam that ye'd walk up. Bone dry. But... the greatest pit in Scotland at the time and the largest as in terms o coal... and a real tragedy tae... went on fire. I was going tae say they let it go on fire because in ma days in Wemyss, all the firemen, their nose, gob stink, they could- they knew when an incipient heating, they knew just the smell; they're conditioned tae it from their days. Sulphurous... light and the atmosphere, ye know. Because there was a seam over there, very subject tae spontaneous combustion.

[pause in recording]

0h 06m 00s

DS: After six years as undermanager-

UF: Was that in '37?

DS: '37. And the war came out and intervened in these years. And the government took over the pits, of course. So, we were under- working under the Defence o the Realm Act all these years. And, eh... I went and I got a first class certificate for a mine manager's job. I had a second class. I felt in later, after I got it, that that's silly, I should've went straight for a first *[laughter]*. But however, and I got the job in the- Niddrie and Benhar, within the city of Edinburgh, in the east side of Edinburgh. And I discovered as I managed that pit, that it seemed tae be separate and distinct from the setting because it was miners. But I'd been conditioned tae that in East Lothian because... oh, the west side o East Lothian... and East Lothian in ma young days, of course, was a very county. Musselburgh races was a great social affair tae everybody. The landlord, the season, ye see, they had... so anyway, Newcraighall, am just using that as an analogy. And I did take, eh... up the [?], I was even the... the clerk tae the county o the auld city. I had tae... claim an amenities equal tae the rest, so.

0h 08m 00s

So, I was there for six years? Aye. And the coal board came in, so I was there in the city and I have photographs and... and a lot o the villagers came up on that New Year's morning, in January 1947. And I and my engineers were up at the top o the pulley wheels, up at the pulley wheels and fixed the coal board flag... and we put up the Board into my office: 'this pit is now managed on behalf of the people, by the National Coal Board'. And I had a bottle o whisky for the house because it's distinct frae England. I had one or two visits tae England and there was always a nip in managers' offices but it's never known poverty-stricken pits in Scotland. But, eh... we had good relations at Newcraighall and... and we toasted success because it had been a dream. And a can go back with researches since, if a just could mention it and I have it in... 1946, at the first mention and it was a strife-ridden period. And the only solution tae... the troubles in pits was the state intervening. I experienced in my time, eh... and I'm looking back on ma collier days again, the 1921 Strike. And it was a time o real poverty in the coalfields. And a... worked... in the soup kitchens, as we call it. The town hall was filled wi schoolchildren and we went in before the school hours and they got a roll and they got a mug o tea. And we were back at twelve and they got soup and the soup was made in these giant coppers, as we called them. Near the killing house, the Co-operative butcher, and their rich- they'd huge bones and everything. The killing house had the richest soup ever. So, they got a bowl o soup and a hunk o bread then, too. So, it was twice a day, all that striking. It was the same in the six months. At the 1926 Strike, it lasted six long months. Difficult tae look back and wonder how they survived, many. And we never had coal; ma father and I was away wi saws, half past five, cutting down timber. And later, after the '21 Strike was on a bit, there was a busload o blacklegs, as we called them. Police,

guarded, going tae Fleets pit, where we worked, filling coal. No, am wrong there. Ye need tae cut- that was the '26 Strike. But... there was no- the [?] and it never happened again, was the miners in the early days o the '21 Strike. They drowned the pits and forcibly forced... and that drowned the fires o the boilers and flooded the pits.

0h 12m 10s

Flooded the pits. That was never repeated in, eh- again because it resulted that our pits, months and months after the pit was settled, before we were really fit for work again. But ma own pit was that St Germain's that I mentioned, away out at the lands o Seton. And a heard the engine going, winding and a says 'damn me' ... after the flooding had happened. And wi ma two pals, I settled tae go walk out and it was nearly two miles. And I was- I worked in the pit but they didn't, and as we came closer intae the pit, there were three sailors, moved straight intae view, away in the distance of us, wi their rifles and bayonets. And ma pals wanted tae go back but a says 'no, no, a want tae see what's happening'. And I didn't go near the engineman; I knew him too, he had enough sense but, eh, the two cages had been made intae water chests wi the joiners and they were winding coal- the water was up, half shaft, and the cages were going down and filling themselves and coming up, winding water round the clock. And they just kept looking at us but never spoke and we never spoke and I was sorry later that I had even went but I did, just wanted tae... because there was wee bits o dust-ups, ye know, wi... the police and miners.

0h 14m 00s

But the '26 was a different one. So, there was a case o that but I'll not repeat it to ye I think because [tapping recorder]. Six long months. [?] and it was generally, affected now to be an inspired letter wi the government and the gist of it was... and the movement built up support and- which was mentioned- proposed in the letter, that it would be in the interest for safetymen tae let the bits have a chance tae be ready for production when we finally ceased, ye see. And the miners' union was pressurised a bit and they agreed that safetymen would be allowed tae work. Now, ye'd better switch that bloody thing off [laughter]. Aye, turn it- put it off.

UF: The tape?

DS: After the six month, it was breaking up and on the Friday... a resumption was on for the Monday. But on the Friday, a redundant manager's wife came up tae ma mother's door: 'we want David out this afternoon'. I was the first back but they knew, of course, that I could give him a good report and I just went round the whole pit, I lost some sweat, noting what ma opinion was o the repairs needed here, there, and... the [?] mebbe, etcetera. And I almost did it nonstop and had been a bit soft wi six months on the grass, ye know. So, that was the end o that six-

0h 16m 12s

UF: When you- when you say 'six months on the grass', we saw a photograph of miners playing cards at the Links. Was it the Links?

UF: I think so, yes.

DS: Aye, it would be.

UF: I mean, did they turn up to the pit every day?

DS: Then, that six months? No, no.

UF: No.

DS: Oh, we never seen any o the blacklegs [*laughter*]. The Fleets pit was remote, ye see. Prestonlinks was on the main road where that big power station is.

UF: Yes.

DS: That was Prestonlinks Pit. But, eh... the miners' club in the '26 Strike, the miners' welfare it was, then, and there was card playing and all that, ye know, and this, that and the other. But a lot o the young miners, they got jobs as farmers because they were in harvest in the- and a lot o the farmers were good because- and young miners were grand workers, ye know. And even down the Borders towns, there was quite an influx and... and a good few found wives down there [*laughter*].

UF: [*laughter*]

DS: But what a think, thinking back six months and the barest for some o them, ye see, there was no real funds, ye know, or union funds, as ye know them now, pension funds, making millions now. There wasn't anything like that. And, eh... the parish for the worst cases, it was just a pittance, ye know.

UF: Mm.

DS: I know in ma mother's case, well, she was very thrifty, there... aw their war certificates and everything, ye ken, I mean, they all went and... but she just seemed tae accept it, as a hazard and...

0h 18m 00s

UF: And what was the outcome of the '26 Strike?

DS: We'd been back wi a break in wages and a half an hour longer day [*laughter*]. It's true. We'd been back wi a break in wages and half an hour longer day [*laughter*]. We had gained a concession on the long- on the day from the- I think it was 1908 or 1912, that the miners won the eight-hour day. And it was... won it not just by negotiation o coal owners. It went on the statute because it was part o the Coalmines Act: an eight-hour day. It meant eight hours plus one winding time, as I think I explained tae ye. So, we didn't go back victors wi any [*laughter*]... remarkable... we were bloody [?] tae oor knees. That was it. Oh, it was a cruel time, of course. It was... post-war, the First War, ye know, that Britain lost all it's European markets. Because 1912, as the records go, was the greatest manpower in the pits and the greatest output ever, annually... because British ships were carrying British coal tae the four corners o the world. A tremendous export. And the shipbuilding was booming, pits were... spreading underground, greater depths, bigger areas, faster than they could ventilate and there were so many damned explosions and hazards and...