
The Human Element: Oral History and Mining History

By Jim McBride
Past President, Mining History Association

When I was initially contacted about being a candidate for president of the Mining History Association, I quickly rejected the idea. I did so for a number of reasons, but principally because I didn't think of myself, then or even yet, as a "mining historian." I became involved, and deeply interested, in mining because my history graduate work and research was in organized mine labor. My master's thesis in history was on the Western Federation of Miners in Arizona and my dissertation was a biography of an organizer for the WFM. However, it didn't take me long to realize that, if I were to understand miners in organized labor, I needed to know something of mining. This led me, through the back door if you will, into the study of mining. However, my principal focus, and interest, remained the working miner.

This fit in nicely with my professional career as a teacher, primarily a teacher of Arizona history; and, in my opinion, one can't teach about Arizona, especially prior to World War II, without teaching about miners and mining. Still my focus remained on the working miner, which fit in well with my approach to teaching history at the high-school level. It was primarily a history of people and events—a living, vibrant, history, or at least as vibrant as I could make it.

But as I thought about our organization and its development over the years, it seemed to me that we have focused on prospecting, mine exploration and development, corporations and their growth, and technology and technological change. But we have paid little attention to the "human" element

and its contribution.

That led me into the almost quixotic idea that maybe I could bring a new approach or focus to what we, as a "Mining History Association," could do—or should do: bring the human element into equal status with the other elements. A triad, you might say, of exploration and development, corporations and technological development, and the working miner. That led me to accept being a candidate and, with my election, has been my focus for the past year.

I have spent much of this year trying to gather an understanding of the oral history process and how we could, as a national (actually international) association, become a viable source for identifying, collecting, and making available the oral history accounts of working miners. The initial step was to locate a national organization to provide guidance. Easily done; it was the Oral History Association, organized in 1966. It currently has seven affiliates: New England Assoc. for Oral History; OHMAR, Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region; Northwest OHA; Southwest OHA; Texas OHA; Michigan OHA; and the International OHA. These organizations provide coverage to every region where mining has occurred.

In addition to the OHA, a number of university libraries have developed specialized oral history collections. Outstanding in this area is the University of California, Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office at the Bancroft Library. And I would be remiss if I did not include among the libraries the work being done at the University of Arizona by the Miners' Story Project. There

are also many state associations and scores of smaller groups busily collecting and archiving oral histories.

I have been surprised by how much interest currently exists in collecting oral histories. As a result of what I have written for our newsletter, I have been contacted by many people who either know of materials already available or want to know how to begin doing oral histories. Most of them have been members of our organization, but a surprising number are people who somehow heard of my interest, and have e-mailed me about small, usually manuscript, collections that they have come across in a wide variety of local historical organizations. While most of these have been located in small mining camps, I recently talked to an old friend who told me of the tapes he collected years ago as a university professor that are now in the University of Texas library at Austin. Although not all of the tapes are about mining, a good number deal with mining in Arizona.

In addition, I have recently received two books of oral history. The first, *Mother Magma: A Memoir of Underground Life in the San Manuel Copper Mine*, by Onofre Tafoya, is a fascinating account of his experiences underground over thirty-eight years. The second, sent to me by Ed Raines, is a book of oral interviews of miners who worked in the Victor-Cripple Creek mining district by Sylece Andromeda, *Hardrock Man: Whispers From Underground*.

Hardrock Man is more a true work of oral history, with Andromeda interviewing twenty-one miners from the Cripple Creek District. What impressed me most about this book was that these miners moved from mine to mine, both within the district and all over the West (true ten-day miners). Their stories are accounts of their experiences in a wide range of mines and climatic conditions. Andromeda followed a set pattern in her interviews, making sure that each miner received the same basic set of questions, and allowing them to tell of their own individual

experiences. It is truly a book that anyone interested in doing oral history should read before starting out.

An example of oral history in mining in Arizona is the project directed by Renee Ross, *Voices from a Mammoth Copper Ledge*. Ross, with grants and support from several organizations, interviewed over twenty-five workers from all areas of the San Manuel Mine: miners, mill workers, and administrators. In addition to presentations at eight different locations, she has made tapes and video recordings available to researchers and the public in three different repositories on "what it means to be a miner in twentieth century Arizona."

Possibly the best example in Arizona of what can be done is the work mentioned earlier, the Miners' Story Project, designed to "preserve and share stories about life in mines and mining communities in the Southwest." A much larger undertaking, the Miners' Story Project travels around Arizona and New Mexico in a trailer, conducting interviews with "current miners, former miners, friends and families of miners." The results of this effort will be available in the new University of Arizona Science Center.

Although the Mining History Association cannot hope to fund such elaborate undertakings, I think that our members have the capability and contacts to identify and record the stories and experiences of miners and mine workers in our local areas. As members of a community, we are often able to both identify individuals and to gain their acceptance, an important step in getting a formal, recorded interview. While we may not be able to preserve these interviews as the Miners' Story Project has, we can certainly find area universities, libraries, and historical societies willing, possibly even eager, to accept, maintain, and make them available to the local community and to researchers. As I have worked on this subject, I have been pleasantly surprised to learn how much is already available in small collections and depositories around the country.

The first step in undertaking such a project has already been taken in conjunction with our annual conference in 2007. For the first time we had a formal workshop designed to train us to perform a specific activity as individuals. On Thursday, 7 June, Barbara Sommers conducted a formal training session in oral history for conference participants, who received instruction in the practical, legal, and administrative aspects of doing oral history interviews. Although the workshop was restricted to twenty-five participants, I believe it was an encouraging step toward being a more active Mining History Association. With this small, possibly hesitant step, we have moved decisively toward becoming an organization capable of making a significant and continuing contribution to mining history.

Having said all of that, I now propose that we look ahead to what I believe is a logical corollary to this training: the collecting of information and its dissemination. What I propose is an even greater leap forward: that we establish a listserv. For several years I have subscribed, as I'm sure many of you have, to a Listserv; two in my case, for Labor history and Western history. Both of them have kept me informed about the current focus, research, availability of resources, and general direction of both scholarly areas. In addition to the queries, I have benefited from the wealth of knowledge, both of content and resources, offered by the responders.

To my knowledge, there is no comparable

site for mining history. I have contacted the individuals responsible for those two Listserves regarding the effort and expense involved in their operation. Both indicated that, once established, maintenance requires only thirty minutes or so a day. What the expense is in terms of creation and equipment, I have no idea. However, considering the number of Listserves which exist, it surely cannot be prohibitive. I propose that we consider making this move.

We have members in most of the significant mining areas of the world, except for South America and Africa. We have members with knowledge and experience from working in those areas. We have members who can respond to the practical questions, as workers and managers, as well as to the academic ones. With the almost instantaneous contact that the worldwide web of the internet now makes available, our organization can—make that should—become an active leader in collecting and disseminating mining history information and understanding. Not an easy task, to be sure, but in my opinion a logical one. ■

Jim McBride, long a member and officer of the Mining History Association, is a faculty associate at Arizona State University, where he teaches Arizona's history. His research has mainly been concerned with organized mine labor, and he is currently working on a history of the miners at San Manuel, Arizona.