
2000 Mining History Association Presidential Address

by Richard Graeme

As I look over this group, I am once again struck by the thought of just how much has been accomplished by the many of you in preserving the history of the great American mining industry. I think that you, as a group, can take justifiable pride in what has been accomplished. I reflect on the many thousands of documents, great and modest, that now survive because of your efforts. Another thing which comes to mind is the new-found corporate awareness of the importance of preservation, which has developed in no small part because of your work. Also, there can be little doubt that a goodly number of historic mining sites are better for the efforts of some in this group. I know that the threats to historic mining sites from development, neglect, or overly zealous environmental remediation have been met by increased awareness, often from you. In recognizing these good works, it is then with some reservation that I suggest that perhaps the most ephemeral part of all mining history may not be receiving the attention it deserves. I am alluding to the human side of mining.

To be sure, some of you have interviewed individuals who played a role in this fascinating industry. I was quite pleased when Emmett Harder played portions of a taped interview with Harry Briggs and I was delighted to hear Sally Zanjani tell of her father's role in the Progressive Movement in an earlier Nevada. Vikki Ford's story of one oral history program is equally exciting, as are other such efforts. I thank each of these dedicated individuals for their preservation of the words and experiences of some of those involved in this part of our past.

But recently, my wife Monica pointed out to me that in spite of my deep interest in mining history, I had done very little to chronicle the events of my

own career. Thus, I am now asking: What has each of you done in this regard? It is my considered opinion that we all have some responsibility to save at least a portion of mining's past—our part. Many of you have been involved in mining in one way or another, and no small number of you have been in the industry for many years. Just as importantly, some of you, without working directly in mining, have had extensive contact with many people who did.

It might be asked: So where do I begin? A reasonable question, to which I reply: With you. Most of us would say that we have lived rather ordinary lives. But what is ordinary in our minds is not so to many others, and will certainly not be considered ordinary by succeeding generations. It is not an act of supreme egotism to record the events of your career. Neither is it inappropriate to memorialize the many, many experiences or bits of information gleaned through an interest in mining history.

This effort is probably more important now than at almost any time in the recent past. The last three or four decades have been ones of great transition for mining. Gone are the great underground mines of Butte and Bisbee, as are those of the copper country of Michigan. The wonderful Silver Valley of Idaho is but a feeble shadow of what it once was, and many, many more now-closed mines spring to memory. Much of what we have lived or studied is gone and, if not recorded, it may well be lost.

By way of personal example, when I first went underground at Bisbee as a miner, just over forty years ago now, things were little different than they had been forty years earlier. I worked alongside men who had decades of experience to share, and share they did. Bisbee's underground closed 25 years ago and I was among the younger of those who left when

the mines closed. What I am suggesting is that our efforts to record the past are something that should not be postponed.

We must preserve our own perceptions of the time. To be certain, what we develop will be subjective, but that is a most valuable aspect of this type of work. It adds a flavor of the times. Over and over again we see history presented in a fashion that reflects but a single perspective. So often this is the result of a lack of eyewitness information, as few took the time to tell their stories. We can help write the history of mining for the last half of the 20th century—and we should—because we have been part of it. But to do this, it is critical that those of us who

have so loved the industry leave that information for the authors of tomorrow. After all, as PBS is so fond of saying, “If we don’t do it, who will.”

In closing, let me try to frame the need to do this in what I believe to be a most pointed way. Some years ago, when discussing with one of my sons, then 13, my desire to work on what was to become a publication, I indicated that it would take some time away from him. He encouraged me by saying that “if someone knows something that no one else does and dies without sharing the knowledge, he has stolen from the future.” Let none of us, then, be a thief who steals from the future.