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One Year Underground, Reminiscences of a Trammer's Helper

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One Year Underground, Reminiscences of a Trammer's Helper.

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by Kent Randell

My great-grandfather, Mauritz Randell, was born May 12th, 1855, on the Hernesharju farm in Vanhakylä village of Isojoki parish, in the Pohjanmaa region of Western Finland. His name in Finland was Rantala and was probably anglicized by a mine supervisor upon arrival to the United States. He emigrated in 1887 and while he and his wife lived most of their lives in a place called *Kuparisaari*, the "Copper Country," or Keweenaw Peninsula, of Northern Michigan, neither of them learned English. Finns had their own meeting halls, churches, and even stores, so speaking English was not a necessity. He worked underground as a miner until he got injured. He then worked in the above-ground "dry" during his later years until succumbing to consumption in January of 1930. He was 54 years old.

My grandfather Oscar Valentine Randell left school after the 8th grade and found work in a lumber camp. Like his father, he would later work underground for many years and later did "surface work" above ground. He worked on the legendary "Dredge" before Calumet & Hecla sold it to the Quincy Mining Company. Today, the lopsided, rusted, and half-sunken dredge can be seen from the road while traveling on highway M-26 between Hubbell and Dollar Bay and is a popular destination for urban explorers.

ONE YEAR UNDERGROUND

My father, Clyde Randell, graduated from Calumet High School in 1957 and had only been out of school for one week when he entered the U.S. Army, serving as a Combat Engineer for six months, and then spending four years in the reserves as a "Weekend Warrior." After getting out of the Army he kicked around for about four years while looking for steady work and direction. For a time he was employed as a part-time mechanic near his home in the Copper Country. He also worked at the American Motors plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin while living in Zion, Illinois, a town where many members of his home congregation, the Finnish First Apostolic Lutheran Church (an offshoot of Arctic Scandinavia's *Laestadian* revival), lived. Shortly after enrolling in Hancock, Michigan's Suomi College (now Finlandia University), the Calumet & Hecla mining company called and before my father could complete a semester, like his father and grandfather before him, he chose to work underground. A job in the mine sounded like a good opportunity for a young man without money or prospects - or a car.

Education was strongly valued and every parent's dream was to have their children go to "The Tech" (Michigan Technological University). The people mining the Copper Country were working hard, but they were not making good money and were under the direction of the copper company. The first time my father walked down the stairs holding one of my grandfather's mining buckets, which he had fetched from the attic, my grandmother Elma Ruth Rauha Randell wept. My grandfather still made that same walk down the stairs, carrying a mining bucket and dressed in a miner's clothes, as a man leaving his middle-aged years. Owing to the very close resemblance between my father and grandfather Oscar Randell, my grandmother must have been reminded of her what her husband looked like as a young man on his first day of work before spending many years laboring underground.

"Don't go in the mine, stay in college!" pleaded my grandmother.

Later, while on the job, my father could tell if my grandmother was angry with him when he opened his lunch bucket and found that his mother had taken a bite out of his sandwich.

Clyde Randell worked as a trammer's helper at Centennial #2 Mine north of Calumet, one mile beneath the surface of the earth on levels 51 through 55. He started in the fall of 1961 and made \$55 a week. On

some days he would go to work when it was dark and it would still be dark when he left the mine.

Without ceremony or formal introduction, the new miner finds himself sitting in the "man car" - a row of chairs attached to a long steel cable called the "rope" - without seat belts or anything else to hold onto. When the car slowed down the whole unit would shake like it was on a bungee cord, and if a person fell forward, they would fly down the dark shaft. The old-timers attempted to comfort the scared, fresh faces by giving them advice:

"Remember Level 22," someone said to Clyde.

My father poked the guy next to him, "What do I have to remember on level 22?"

"There's a low beam, you gotta duck or it will take your head off."

"Is it 22 yet?"

"Hmmm?"

"When is it 22?"

"We're here, DUCK!"

Afraid for his life, my father ducked. Everybody laughed at his expense. The rest of the trip, the other miners were hooting and hollering at him to watch out for this obstacle or that obstacle. (Of course, there were none.)

"It was all part of the ritual," says my father. "When you started off, you weren't guided by the hand... Not *harmful* things, but just things to amuse themselves. Nothing too serious."

Centennial #2 was an amygdaloid "open stope" mine, where the miners would blast rock in a "stope," a small shaft that goes up at an angle from the "level," or horizontal shaft. Miners would prime their holes at the end of their shifts and light their fuses. After the explosion the ore would slide down onto the tracks (in a closed *stope*, the ore is trapped by timbers then lowered directly onto a car). The next shift would come in and remove the ore.

Each level in the mine was separated by about 100 feet, and each had a railroad track. The train typically had a "man car," or lead car, which had 20 to 40 batteries on it and would transport the cars. Behind the lead car were three ore cars. In the rear was the "trammer's loader," which had a bucket. After the *trammer's loader* was filled with ore, the trammer would stand on a platform which was attached to the loader car and operate its two levers: one lever for forward and backward, and another lever which would lift the bucket into the air and drop the ore into the adjoining car. The bucket was powered by a pneumatic tube which had to be closely monitored so the train did not accidentally run it over. When a car was loaded with ore, it had to be moved onto a small sidetrack so the next empty car could adjoin the *trammer's loader* and be filled with ore. When the last ore car was filled, the previously-loaded ore cars were re-attached to the train, the loader car was removed, and the small battery-operated train would travel about a quarter mile to the incline shaft where the trammer or trammer's helper called to the surface and a "skip" car was sent down to take the payload up to the surface. Three or four smaller loads could fit onto one *skip*.

Every trammer was required to fill a predetermined quota of car loads, for example 10 trips to the main incline shaft, three cars a piece. This was called the "company count." After completing the *company count*, the trammer received a bonus for every extra car. Trammers would often work very intensely throughout the day, even skipping lunch or dinner (breaks were unheard of), to finish the *company count* early and earn extra money.

The trammer for whom my father worked spoke English with a German accent. He was a husky, blonde

German of about 45 years and his primary goal was to get extra pay above the *company count*. He was so strong that if a car went off of the track, he would come about with a crowbar and yank the car back on the track. My father has no memory of the trammer stopping to eat lunch. "He had more of a work ethic than a chatting ethic," says my father.

Young ones had to hold their own because the old timers loved to give the rookies a bad time. Not long after my father started his job, while changing his clothes and cleaning up in the above-ground "dry," an older man kept teasing young Clyde as he was washing his face and arms in a porcelain pan. The older gentleman would not let up. After my father emptied the wash pail, he wound up and hit the bully on the top of his head and knocked him to his knees. Captain Kingston heard the noise, ran into the dry and hauled Clyde into his office. "You can fire me if you want," said my father, "but I ain't putting up with that crap anymore." Captain Kingston explained that a person can hold their own without losing their temper or getting into fights. Occasionally, my father was reminded of the incident by the old-timers, who would say, "Watch out! He's gonna hit you!" as the rookie walked by.

As a trammer's helper, Clyde's job was to pry apart the "loose" with a crowbar. The *loose* was removed from the "hanging," which was ore that jutted out from the ceiling. Ore also protruded from the floor of the shaft. If a crowbar couldn't pry apart the *loose*, dynamite was needed. Before lighting the dynamite the trammer or trammer's assistant would yell, "Block in the hole!" and everybody would stand behind a pillar.

The mine contained boxes and boxes of "powder," or dynamite sticks, which were not handled gently and the sticks were casually thrown into the metal cars. The kegs of powder were stacked up in a room which had a makeshift wall. Sometimes people would smoke *inside* the powder room. In the days before OSHA, sometimes my father would play with the dynamite to pass the time. Using an intentionally short fuse on a small stick of dynamite, he would yell, "Block in the hole," and then BAM, the explosion would frighten his co-workers before they had a chance to get into position. Once, after setting off an explosion, my father realized that he had also destroyed the place where the miners of his level stored their lunch buckets. The buckets were smashed against the walls and bits of sandwiches and bread were strewn around. My father, fearing for his life, ran down the shaft and asked the pit boss, Benny Masenado, to come to his aid. "I'll quit! I'm not going back in there," said Clyde. But boss Masenado stood by my father as they went back to the spot where men were picking rocks out of their sandwiches. The pit boss gave all of the men extra credit on their *company counts* so they could buy new buckets.

There was a shift boss on each level, with between five and eight levels operating at once and 4-5 miners on each level. A lot of bosses were mean, but not Benny Masenado, who my father describes as "very eloquent and compassionate." The pit boss would tell my father, "Don't get the smell of the mine in you. Go to college, like my kids did." Sometimes he would say, "Down here, we're digging in the wrong direction."

Miners worked under the constant threat of an air blast (as rock is moved around, natural pockets of air in the soil can become compacted and eventually explode.) People living in the *Copper Country* could occasionally feel air blasts on the surface, even inside their homes. They served as a constant reminder of the activity going on underground. But people did not think of the mine as being particularly dangerous, as plenty of miners lived long lives. During my father's year underground, an air blast occurred after the miners had finished blasting the ore - just as the trammers were descending into the mine to start their shift. Everybody in the *man car* first felt a brush of air flying past, and then came the dust and dirt. My Dad recalls that it felt like the entire mine was caving in. It took three shifts to remove 50 tons of rock and debris, and then it was business as usual. Had the air blast occurred fifteen minutes later, the explosion surely would have resulted in many deaths.

ABOVE GROUND

My father quit the mine after one a year of working underground so that he could attend Suomi College and start taking his education seriously. He was told that he would be blacklisted and would never be rehired by the mine. This was not the case, as they hired him on a "section gang" during the next summer

to be a "gandy dancer," a person in the crew that removes and installs railroad ties. He also worked as a clerk for the carpenter's shop.

After being employed as a deputy for the Houghton County Sheriff's Department while attending Suomi College, the Calumet & Hecla mining company again hired my father to be a security guard. He was issued a .38 *Special* handgun.

The security guard had to insert a key into several time clocks in different buildings to insure that each building was regularly checked. It took some time to recognize all of the keys of the enormous key ring. He also had to check the gauges on the machines to make sure that they were running (air pressure, water pressure, etc.). There was a number to call if there were any problems. My father used the time to study, for example, the Ahmeek Mill had three punches, so he would study for a half-hour on each floor. "It kept me on the honor roll, because I had so much time to study."

"Security was interesting because you never knew what you are going to run into," said my father. At the Osceola 12 - 13 mine checkpoint, my father entered a long, dark warehouse in the early hours of the morning and while walking to the other end to make his punch, he got jumped by a large German Shepherd dog and thought he was being attacked. Although slightly panicked, my father did not use his C & H-issued handgun on the dog. However, the incident spooked my father enough that he decided to keep the .38 Special in the glove compartment of his car from then on. "No way in hell am I gonna shoot anybody under any conditions!" In addition, it was very spooky when the big machines would suddenly kick into action in the still of the night, and my father did not want to accidentally shoot any machines. Even though he didn't carry his C & H-issued .38 Special, he did travel with a "black jack" night stick. During another shift, while sitting silently in a chair, Clyde saw somebody walking in between the machines. "What the heck am I supposed to do about it?" thought my father. "I'm a college student; I'm not going to get killed over a little bit of copper." It turned out that the man had come from another building to use the candy machine.

C & H Security had a long history. The guards were not only in charge of security, they were also information gatherers about what the workers were doing and not-doing on the job. The guards reported whenever people were not working, sleeping, or doing anything else that the company might not approve of. The employees were terrified of the security force. One evening, while checking on Ahmeek Mill, Clyde walked into a room and found somebody sleeping. "I never saw a guy so afraid in my life! 'Don't report me,' he pleaded. 'I'll lose my job, I got a wife and I got a family.'" My Dad said, "Don't worry about it; I'm not gonna say anything." But the guards were always looked at with some sense of suspicion as being part of a spy network. They had heard from their parents or grandparents about C & H's information gathering past, and even though those days were gone, they were not forgotten. "It was a long night making those runs."

THE CORPORATE PARENT AND ESCAPE

Grandfather Oscar Randell had an ambivalent attitude towards his employers. The people had no trust for the mining companies after the company thugs beat up their workers during the 1913-14 Copper strike. The miners also remembered the story of how former Calumet & Hecla President Agassiz had supposedly left money to the workers in his will which was eventually taken by the company men. On the other hand, my grandfather was thankful that he had a job, even though he didn't trust or like the company. He bought a house in Florida Location, outside of the borders of Calumet and Laurium, because the land was not deeded to the copper company (many miners "owned" their houses while leasing the land from the mining company). "I might have to give my blood and soul to the company, but I will not rest my head on land owned by the company."

The mining companies controlled everything, which also meant having their own hospitals which provided medical care to its workers. They did take care of their workers and it was said that those that worked on the surface "didn't die of hard work." The miners could decide to work hard or not work hard to make extra money above the *company count*. In their later years both my grandfather and great-grandfather

were afforded jobs on the surface. People were not driven to their deaths because, naturally, a dead or sick miner is not a useful miner. In the words of my father, it was a "benevolent dictatorship."

As a young man my father made the decision that he wasn't going anywhere and had resigned himself to ending up in the mine. He hadn't taken school seriously, spending most of his four years at Calumet High School "looking out the window." My father attributes peer pressure as the main reason that he escaped the mine. His friends were going to school, mostly at Michigan Tech. Even though he had money and a "56 2-door hard-top Chevy with bubble-skirts and wonderbar radio" with which to haul his friends around, the people that he was hauling around were going out and getting good jobs while my father feared that he would spend the rest of his life in the mine.

"Down here we're digging in the wrong direction."

Clyde Randell would later graduate from Suomi College with help from the woman who would later become his mother-in-law. Irma Abramson Hannula had not only finished high school, but graduated second in her class (it was uncommon for a Finn or a woman to complete high school in those days). She would ensure that the man who married her daughter, Karen Hannula, would graduate from something greater than Machine Shop. Clyde went on to earn three degrees from Northern Michigan University and would spend 32 years teaching High School English and Social Studies. He now enjoys retired life.