

Wilmot Historical Society, Kearsarge Valley Road, Box 97, Wilmot, New Hampshire

Transcript of Walter Walker interviewing his father, Frank, about the Garnet Mine in North Wilmot.

(There is no date on this tape, but it might be the early 80s as Frank was 75 at the time of the interview.) Transcribed from original tape by Kimberly White in 2019.

Walter: Now, I'll set up by saying, you're my father, Frank Walker, and you're 75 years old, and about when was it that you worked at the garnet mine in the quarry?

Frank: I don't know what year it was.

Well roughly, in the 20s?

Let's see. I have to stop and think. Is that thing going? **Mmm.** (Chuckle) 1922, I think. I think so.

And you worked there just the summer?

I worked in the pulverizing plant.

Now that was in the quarry or at the mill?

No, that was at the mill. I worked nights, oh for, 6 or 7 weeks.

So they had two shifts?

Yes, they had 2 shifts—12 hours a shift.

12 hours?

Yeah, I started at 7 at night and got through at 7 in the morning.

So the guys during the day worked from 7 in the morning till 7 at night?

Right, it was a 12-hour shift.

Do you have any idea what they got paid—do you remember roughly?

I got \$2.75 cents a day.

A day?

12 hours, see. Oh, I think that the other fellows, the fella that really had charge of it got more than that. All I was there for was to cover insurance actually.

Well, what do you mean?

Well, one man there all alone **Oh, oh for the plant.** For the plant, see, if anything went wrong, I could go down to the house and get Norman up, you know, and he'd come up and straighten things out or I could throw the clutch, you know, if any accident happened, there's someone there.

So, you think the older men were getting more than that?

I think they was getting more than that. I was just a helper. But they had some other fellows work out in back there during the time, bagging garnet—loose, you know.

And you got \$2.75 for 12 hours? And you were about how old then, you say? You were more than a teenager?

Oh yes. I guess I was past 18.

Now, you say this was in the pulverizing plant?

It was that big kerosene engine. They could hear it over in Wilmot and up on Cardigan Mountain and down in Andover. It went all the time--a regular 'boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.' You never heard it, I don't think. **No, no, no. This was to begin with.** That's to begin with. **Now did you go from there to the quarry?** No, then I come one day and they says, "Would you like to work in the mill?" And so, I says, "Alright." Well, I guess I asked him, "What was I gonna do"? and he said, "Bag garnet." So what you did is you had these bags here beside you and you held on to the strap and you pulled the handle and when it balanced you were at 100 lbs. If you went over, you take a scoop and take out a little until it weighed right and then you tied it up and knocked it off the scales and it went down to some guys down to send off. I bagged 17 tons that day. By hand, I'd blister come night you know, it was that rope, you know, it wasn't . . . you had twine that you tied the bag with and you'd have to tie it tight. And the bags were heavy things, you know. **Now, how much did you say you bagged again?** 17 tons.

Now did you have to handle it?

No. All I did was grab a bag and hope that when the thing begin to balance, try and get it right. Sometimes you could and sometimes you couldn't. You'd have to have a little scoop and you'd take out the right amount and dump it in the box. Next one come along, you wouldn't have quite enough so you'd scoop up a little and put it in, tie it and knock it off the scales . . . just push off—there was a chute here you just kicked it off the top and down it went, you know. That was all there was to it. And I think I worked there about a week.

You got a little bit more money?

I got \$3.00 for an 8 hour day. Well then he come to me and says, "How would you like to work up in the quarry since there's a bunch of the dust and all that stuff up there.

So there was a lot of dust in the mill there?

Oh, quite a bit.

Because somebody said they had all kinds of screens and stuff, there was hardly any dust in there.

You could see the dust going out the top of the mill, oh, a regular stream of it. The roof was all white with it, you know, but inside, where the tables were it was the worst. Now, it wasn't dusty where I was bagging it cuz' that was all clean stuff, you know. But, well, where the rollers were, it wasn't dusty, but up where those shaking tables were, it were pretty dusty and the fan should have taken every bit out.

Did the men have to work up there in the dust?

Yeah, one fella would operate those tables. But he'd take his shorts--he could put on the mask, you know, to stop the dust. I guess it did some, but that's hot, you know, that thing. Well, so I went up on the hill--Lawrence Dean was working out there at the time, and Bertagna was working there and Walker, what was his first name, anyway, you know, wait and it will come to me. Oh, it doesn't make any difference.

This is one of the Bertagna's from Wilmot Center, of course?

Yeah, Joe Bertagna. **Oh, Virginia's husband.** Virginia's husband worked there. I can't think of Walker's name. But anyway, Walker, Bertagna, myself, and oh, there was a bunch of fellas that came up from Manchester they told 'em they was goin' to paste sandpaper on the blocks. Instead of that they was pasting the blocks with a great big 14 or 16 pound sledge hammer. (Laughter) Harry Prescott worked up there, and I don't know, a lot of different fellas. I don't remember who they were but a lot of 'em, some of 'em came from Manchester. They was a pretty sharp lot. Like, their hands was blistered, and one of 'em got kidney trouble from shaking his back, you know, but he stayed on with it, by God, and he came out of it alright.

So you moved up to the quarry?

Yup, I worked up there until snow come and that was the end of me.

Now that was an 8-hour day up there?

Yup, that was an 8-hour day up there.

Was that \$3?

Yup. So what I did up there I guess a few days, I broke rock with a 14 pound sledge hammer. They had a 20 pounder, but the boss says, "You don't want that." Start with a 14. I never got up to the 20 pound one. Some guys was using 16. I don't think any of 'em used those 20's, but I don't know. Gee, they were huge, you know. Well then, Lawrence and I would run the car, that we'd put the rock into the car. First you'd put it into a wheelbarrow, just about all it would fit, then you'd go up this ramp to the car, and just tip it into the car. When you get the car full up to the top, well then, you'd hitch it on to a cable and an electric motor would haul it up out of the pit.

Electric motor?

Yup. Well then, you unhooked your cable, gave it a little push and it went by gravity down to the crusher. And when they got down there the rails curled up on the end, and there was a trip on it, and the minute it touched that you'd pull that trip, over it went, and all you did was pull the car back down and you had to push it back once you got it rolling, all you had to do, there were two of us, you know, just walk along and push the car back and hook on the cable and let it down into the pit.

Now this was all up on top of the hill?

This was up to the quarry. Yes.

And the crusher?

The crusher was the tall building down at the end where the tramway went down.

That was down at the mill—the crusher.

No. That was on top of the hill. The tramway brought the stuff by gravity down the hill. The loading bucket pulled the empty one back.

So, you didn't do any blasting or anything of that sort?

Oh no, I didn't have anything to do with that. Let's see, Harry Prescott was the driller, and he loaded it and so forth. Charlie Hines worked there, and he helped him some and Ed Loveburn from Grafton, I think maybe he had something to do with it. Well I know that Harry Prescott and Loveburn both worked up at Ruggles Mine up in Grafton so they both knew what they was doing. And Charlie, he was a blacksmith, he sharpened the drill [until] it was all nice and square. If you didn't you couldn't break anything with it. So, he'd be out there when he didn't have blacksmith work, and they did the loading with the dynamite and connecting up the wires and all such business. Then they'd get everybody out of the place and they'd go into the blacksmith shop and Ed Loveburn, he'd count noses to make sure every man was in there, you know, and he'd shut the door. And then he'd reach up and there's a padlock on the switch that switched it from the main line, you know. I don't know how much the voltage was. He'd take off the padlock and he'd holler, "Fire", I don't what for, but he'd pull that switch down and boy the ground would shake, you know, and you'd listen and "bing, bing, bing, bing" around on the roof you know. And so, there wasn't anything big enough to break down through, I guess, but . . . So then, they usually did that, most of the time, just before quitting time, so the smell of the dynamite--because it will give you a terrific headache if you work down in it, you know. That would all go away for the next month, but they'd be sure using that house.

So, in this mine, there were chunks that were too big for the crusher that you had to break up with the hammers.

Yeah, they used to load it pretty heavy with pretty fine stuff, but gosh, it didn't take anything too awful big you know.

. . . power for the mill.

Well, no, the only thing I had anything to do with was helping haul the boiler off there. The new boiler had to weigh 16 tons, and they had 8 pair of horses to start that thing, and they couldn't haul it up the hill. They had a big set of blocks, and they'd put four horses on to the blocks, you know, and they pulled up stone posts, and they pulled up trees. Why it looked as if there'd been a hurricane up and down the hill. Now, it pulled a great big tree up you know.

Now by blocks, a lot of people wouldn't know what you mean—you mean rope and pull blocks, rope and tackle. And what was the rope, inch, or more?

Inch and a half, big rope you know. The last pull we made, they made, I didn't exactly do that, but the whole crowd, to get it over to the power plant down the road. Actually, there used to be a great big maple tree back in there. It's gone now, I gues. Well, they had four horses on the blocks, and they

had the rest of them on this thing pulling, you know. Well, of course the horses couldn't pull as slow as the box moved along, you know, but they were trying. All of a sudden there was a huff and a puff, and I looked up and there was a shear, it went out of sight right up in the air, you know.

What did?

he split the shear in the block right open. They hollered, "keep going, keep going" the rope was just dragging over the edge of the left block, but they landed the boiler up in there, you know. Gee, it was a huge thing. You must have seen that.

Yes, I vaguely remember that. This wasn't the original boiler?

No, the first boiler came from Boston, from a big building down there for heating? Second hand. It was in good shape. That they took up there, I think, with 4 horses on a travis sled. I remember when I was a kid and seeing it going up so that wasn't near as big. This one was a monster.

So, your father got in on the second one and you remember seeing it?

My father was in on hauling all this lumber up to build the factory out of.

Where did that lumber come from?

As I understand it, it came from Dean's Mill up in Orange, shipped down by the carload down from South Danbury, and my father and George Peasley, and probably Fred Currier, and I don't know who. Course you couldn't haul too much to a load up there—it was awfully muddy, you know-- but they was hauling lumber all winter, it seems like. It had been in the winter, a lot of it.

Now, this is the main mill?

Main mill and the powerhouse.

Now this was the first mill?

This was going on when I was seven years old so that makes it 1910 that took place.

Well, did the mill burn once?

Just once. And I explained the whole darn business.

Now the powerhouse was built originally to power the mill?

Yes.

So that was built the same time as the mill?

Oh, yes. I used to haul coal up, too.

From the railroad up?

From the railroad up to the power plant. They did that from two carloads at a time. Fred Carrier would haul, and I would haul. I don't remember whether Frank Willis did or not. He might have. Thirty tons took quite a lot of hauling for a carload, that is.

Who was the guy that worked with the boiler plant?

That was Del Dawson. He was from Colorado and the foreman who came up from Vermont and set up all this machinery—he was Woolcott. He was from Colorado, too. They worked some kind of mine out there, I don't know what kind.

They set it up?

They set it up, and he was a fireman and engineer, Dawson was. Conley, I don't know, he was some kind of a bookkeeper, I guess, partly.

Who was it in later years, that ran the power plant?

Roy Litchfield. And then, there was two or three . . . oh, Henry Pillsbury fired it for three years. Oh, there was a fella, some relation to Germa down here. He fired it for a couple of years or so I guess. He was the one that taught Roy Litchfield how to operate it. I guess Roy was the last one.

Was there more to it than just firing the boiler . . . there was something to the generator controls?

Oh, you had to know how to operate the switchboard, but all the meters and stuff, I don't know what the heck they were, you know, but it had a board with all kinds of dials and stuff on it. You had to turn these to get it just right. And you had to start the steam engine so the darn thing would take off and so forth.

Was there a whistle up there that used to blow?

Yes. You could hear it for miles.

I vaguely remember that.

You could hear it clear up on the hill—it told 'em when it was time to go to work, and time to eat dinner, and time to get through.

I can vaguely remember that.

Course, it was pretty darn loud right here.

Did they ever have any accidents here, you know, with the boilers?

No.

Of course, the big accident is when they had the ice storm that crossed the power line down over the . . .

The tree came down on the line and pushed down on the telephone line that went into the factory, and that's the way they think it got on fire.

And it started at night, and so nobody knew about it 'til it was probably gone.

It was a great birch tree dropped the electric line down on top of the telephone line and into the plant.

You don't know just where that occurred, where the birch . . . did they find the actual tree they thought that did it?

I think somewhere out . . . it wouldn't be exactly in front of Norman's house, but somewhere in that area between the mill and Hobbs Hill, but somewhere in that area as I understand it.

So that would explain why it went into the mill instead of coming in to, say, a house here.

Well, you know, people were burned in Franklin, and I believe someone got scorched in Concord through the telephone line.

Oh, you mean the operators, from that same accident?

The same thing. It went down the line somehow, the telephone line, I don't know, I suppose it jumped the circuit or something. Yeah, Franklin and Concord were the two places where they..... I don't know how bad they got burned, not too much, I guess, but it popped things around a little bit.

So, for all we know it might have been sparks coming off our pole here, but being night at the time, you wouldn't have been aware of it, and it wasn't enough to do any damage.

It didn't blow any fuses or anything.

Wasn't there a big lawsuit over there because of failure of the power company to keep the trees clear and Norman finally settled out of court, or it got settled anyway.

Norman worked it out. He got a settlement anyway.

And then, of course, he never rebuilt the mill, but he went into business in Boston.

Yes, he went down to Boston and was a foreman of some kind of a sandpaper establishment. I think that was in Jamaica, now I'm not sure of that.

Did he buy a company down there?

No, he just worked there. Well, I know Willard took 5 tons on his truck down there one night. It was 2 o'clock in the night to Jamaica Plains in Massachusetts. And they was making all kinds of sand paper. We went through the plant.

Now, they've given up using the power plant. That's why they had the electricity run in there.

They used both. They used electricity and the power plant to operate the new pulverizers. They added another one of those and the old kerosene engine was getting feeble, I guess so that was probably 5 horsepower for each one of those things. And he couldn't make enough electricity, that's why they put the line up through there.

Now you speak of an old kerosene engine. What do you mean by that? Like a gasoline only fired by kerosene?

That's right, only there was no spark plugs in it. It was more of a diesel--they didn't call it a diesel. They called it a kerosene engine 'cuz it was run by kerosene.

They had more than one of those or just one?

Just one because they only had one pulverizer at that time.

And that power was just to pulverize . . .

Just to pulverize and the fans. There was just that one unit to power.

So, then he really had put a lot into the mill just a little while before it burned—he added some of this stuff and he needed . . .

Well, that last pulverizer had been there, of course, more than a year or two.

And that was the reason for putting in the public power, the electricity.

He couldn't generate enough here to . . . that's another thing. They used to operate that in the winter and this power plant wouldn't be running, you see.

Oh, they had to shut this down in the winter—they didn't have the need for it?

They wouldn't run it for just those two things for 50 horsepower.

So actually then, this plant was running right up until the power plant burned? And then after it burned, they sort of just let it fall in?

They tore it down and the boiler went to Argentina.

So, it was still being used?

I don't know if it was being used or not, but that's where that boiler went. I don't know where the generator went, but they said the boiler was going to Argentina. I think Arthur told me that himself.

They didn't take the boiler out the same way they took it in, right? Horses and . . .

Oh, it went out on a huge truck. A man sat up top of the boiler with a stick, and he was heisting up all the wires down through here otherwise they'd take them all along with them, you know. They must have gone out by Roy Ford's otherwise they could never go under the underpass with it.

So, they salvaged the boiler from the power plant but there wasn't too much to salvage from the mill. Scrap iron maybe. I remember you salvaged some of the old metal roofing.

That wasn't any good for salvage 'cept for some chicken coop. (chuckle)

Don't I remember they tried using some of the waste?

They shipped carloads of it to Boston for sidewalks.

I knew they used some for something.

Decoration. There was a lot of black mica in it. I don't know exactly what they really wanted, but they used it for making cement, but I think the black mica is what they really wanted. When it's in cement I suppose it sparkles a little, you know. They tried to build a road from Willard's up to Norman's but the minute that got wet it was the slipperiest stuff you ever could imagine.

Slippery stuff. Something like clay then.

Something like clay—it's so fine.

You didn't go to the fire.

Heavens, no.

Because you were laid up then ... You said Fred LaJoie saw it from where he lived.

Sure, he could, like across the hills.

And, by the time they got there, of course, it was too late.

There wasn't anything they could do. There wasn't any water supply, and it was pretty well on the way, I guess. It would have to be to light the sky up, I guess.

Your father never worked there.

No. He hauled garnet, and he hauled lumber, and he helped bring the boiler. I don't know how many other people hauled in stuff. Well, I know my father went up on Cardigan Mountain I think, with George Peasely, with a gasoline engine—that's a real big gasoline engine, isn't it?--to operate the lathes and the bench saw and whatever they had in the machine shop. It took 'em a day or two to get down off Cardigan Mountain, and Woolcott went right along with them. I guess they had quite a lot of fun up there.

They had a bit more than spring water? (Chuckles)

I presume they did. I don't know anything about it though. Of course, Woolcott was a good guy. Of course, he got into it a little— a scrap with Cummings—he was the first foreman up there to the quarry, and all the help was Italian at that time. They went down by here, course you couldn't understand a word of it.

They had a little disagreement?

He wasn't too popular, I guess. He come down off the hill one day with a big [?] wrapped around his hand, and he told Woolcott he was gonna wrap it around his neck. Woolcott picked up something like an iron bar and said, "You try wrapping that around my neck and you're gonna have a hole runnin' right plum through ya!"

You didn't see Henry Ford when he came here to . . . ?

No, I didn't see Henry Ford, but Roy Litchfield was operating the power plant at that time, and he boarded here.

When you say here, you're talking about the Walker Homestead where you're living now? This was just below where the power plant used to sit?

Yeah, about a quarter of a mile below. So yeah, a car came along and parked just below the power plant. This fella came in, looked around, talked with Roy about different things and so forth. Roy didn't know who the dickins' it was. And after they talked awhile, he went out, walked down to his car--it was a big Lincoln—and I don't know if Roy looked at the number plate or what, but he said, "My God, that was Henry Ford." And sure enough it was. He was saying, you know, I wonder if he was thinking of buying the place—he wanted a garnet mine, well he did have one over on Bald Mountain—that's back of Waukeena Lake, you know, and they would ship it to Henry Ford from Danbury in the big chunks, and where he'd mill it, I don't know where.

So, when he came here, this was after he was using this garnet, it was not to inspect it, he was thinking of possibly buying the outfit.

It must have been. After that he bought the one over on Bald Hill.

And he just shipped the ore from there to Dearborn?

Yeah, shipped the ore—didn't crush it or grade it or anything--just crush it up fine enough so a man could lift it, and they'd put it in a coal car—not one of these big ones.

But there wasn't enough there to meet his needs so he's still buying from Davenport?

I don't know what the idea was. There was plenty of it over there, still is, you know.

So you think he's still buying from Davenport even though he's getting the ore from . . . ?

I don't know.

Did Norman ever say anything about him coming here to . . . ?

No, but he talked to Roy about it. Henry Ford, you know, he was kind of a sly one. He wasn't gonna tell Roy what he was there for. And he didn't tell Roy who he was either. He probably didn't even want people to know he was around here.

Did you know of anybody else who met him when he was here and knew who he was afterward?

No.

As far as you know it was just Roy Litchfield and Norman Davenport?

Yes.

Now, a lot of people think of Norman Davenport as kind of gruff and short, but once we thought my sister Marjorie was lost, so what happened then?

Well, you threw a dish or something in the brook or something and mother went out and reprimanded you, or something?

(Mrs. Walker? In background): Marjie thought she was going to get punished.

Well, I think she thought Marjie had thrown it in the brook.

Well, all of a sudden she disappeared. No one knew where she was. Everyone was hunting around, and I suppose Ann [Davenport] and maybe my father, I don't know who was here cuz' I was in the hospital at the time. But anyways, I don't know how Norman found out about it, but he shut down his factory and brought all his men down here to go find Marjie. And I guess they got some hunting in, but anyway he went down there's a well on the side of the hill there, and there's a kind of a recess and a long hen house is out there, and they kinda saw her peeking out from the end of that hen house, and they saw her.

So actually, Norman Davenport was very generous in that respect.

Well, yeah, he was; and when I was in the hospital, (addressing his wife) how many times did he take you down there? (she agrees)

So, you're saying, Norman took mother to Franklin Hospital to visit you many times?

Yup.

Can you think of any other times there were families who were hard-pressed that he helped?

Mother: He was especially nice about the way he did it. He'd call up and say, "well, you and I have a date tonight to go over to Franklin" or something. He didn't act as though he were doing you a favor.

Addressing mother: **Now, you're Annie Walker. You are Frank Walker's wife. We've got to identify this voice.**

Annie: Well, I just thought it was nice because it was such a personal way that he did it.

You never asked him. He just called up and said "we have a date tonight."

Yes. He had such a nice way of doing it. He wasn't doing me a favor. So it was especially nice.

He also had a reputation for getting stuck alongside of the road quite a bit, didn't he? In his old cars?

Frank: Well, he went over down pretty near to the brook by the big hill one time. Let's see, not a lot. There may have been snow that time, I don't know how he got over in there, but . . . I don't know that he'd get stuck all the time, but once in a while he'd get in a little pickle.

Of course, back then, you've got to realize that the roads were much smaller and twisting, the corners were much sharper, closer to the brook, and they weren't plowed like they are today—just when absolutely necessary.

That's right. Well, Lucy, I think it was.

She saw this?

Well, Lucy Eastman was Davenport's maid, and she did all the housework—I don't know if she did all the cooking or what but maybe some of it she knows—so I don't know if it was breakfast, supper or dinner or what, but all of a sudden some argument came up and Marlin let a banana drive at her.

At his wife, Ida?

At Ida. (chuckling) Now I don't know where it hit her, or anything about it, but there might have been more than one banana. But as you say, little things like that happen once in a while and Lucy Eastman told it. We seemed to be quite amused by it.

Well, a banana couldn't cause too serious an injury anyway. It could have been granite.

It could have been peeled. I don't know.

Do you remember the story Mother used to tell how she took a little vacation after you got home and were feeling a little bit better and I was on her lap.

Yeah, I remember her telling about it.

How did that go again?

Well, I don't know. All I remember is that, going down, he reached over and put 5 dollars in her lap and told that it was hers and said she could do anything she wanted to with it.

And didn't she say she wouldn't take it?

Well, I don't know what he said.

Well, as I recall it, I think he said, "Alright, if you don't take it, we'll turn around and go back." This happened right here down in West Andover so they weren't too far away.

End of tape