

Chapter Six

Unity or disunity: perceptions of mateship and 'hip-pocket solidarity'

Mount Morgan was a place of divisions, whether between town and mine, or in the general workplace where every organisation reflected the influence of the mine as the cornerstone of enterprise and service. Yet, within the mine work force a further division was evident. Surface work had its own dangers, but underground mining threatened danger like no other. In this chapter, the focus is upon attitudes and reactions of the mine labour force toward work and management, and relates to the hostile, fabricated environment of the mine workplace. This contrasts with discussion in chapters two and three of town and hinterland place and space, where the total work force was greater than at the mine and gender divisions in employment were less rigid.

Central to this discourse are the complexities and consequences of mining practice and human error, especially in fatal, multiple accidents underground. It will be argued that, in times of mining disaster, the innately spontaneous move to escape from danger prevailed. Yet, at the same time, the concern of those on the surface to rescue men caught in a life-threatening situation surpassed any bonds of mateship, but when the shock of catastrophe and the spirit of valour subsided, men returned to the mine and their own mates.

Workplace bonds between underground men; surface workers and outside employees were typical of values that elevated mateship in 'the nomad tribe' of

Australian bushmen to the level of mythology.¹ At Mount Morgan, the mateship of underground men not only assumed the status of survival dependency emphasised in the bonding practice, but also, as mercenaries who faced the enemy beneath the surface, their mateship had a peculiarly material cohesion. This chapter also investigates the gradual, union inspired confidence of the men and their consistent demands for higher wages and improved conditions. Conversely, although an ideology of hip pocket solidarity intensified as miners sought a fair wage; ultimately, the primary concern of a majority of mine employees reverted to individual desire for economic survival.

Shiftwork dominated time for miners and punctuality was an act of obedience to the call to the underground at a scheduled hour. For those who worked below, the designated rings of electric bells heralded the movement of men and materials. Each level had a code: 'one ring, two, or three'. A cage accommodated eight, the four walls an enclosed box, an unlit place that in a matter of seconds plunged to the depths below: 'Whoosh - down...completely dark until it got to the level required'.² Once there, the men moved along the tunnel to the face. For the uninitiated who went underground, especially in their early years, the experience was unforgettable:

It was frightening ... and when I went down I expected to see dirt and stones similar to what is on the road, but it was altogether different. This was solid rock, very little timber, any amount of places where there was solid rock and there was no need for timber to hold it. There wasn't a lot of electricity down the mine; most workers, miners and horse drivers used candles.³

Fred Cole said the candleholder used – known familiarly as a 'spider' – was a small piece of steel sharpened at one end. The underground worker 'shoved it in the timber' and speared the candle on to the spike. Miners preferred candlelight, where visibility was limited to about a metre and a half at most. Cole declared miners insisted that any bright light in a stope must be extinguished because the cracks in the chamber where

¹ Russell Ward, *The Australian legend*, Melbourne, 1974, p. 106.

² Fred Cole, interview, 8 October 1992, Mount Morgan Oral History Project, (MMOH).

³ Fred Cole, 8 October 1992, MMOH.

they were working became visible; 'what they couldn't see, didn't worry them...they just worked by the candle'. Carpenters and timber workers were required to measure timber underground before it was cut, and 'with a candle you couldn't see...we had carbide lights also, that was our privilege...you fill them with water'.⁴ Charlie Shannon worked underground as an apprentice carpenter in the 1920s. He recalled that:

When the lights went out, we had no lights, no candles...we were supposed to carry candles...unless you've experienced it, you have no idea what darkness is like...you lose all sense of balance, everything. This first thing is, you don't move, you don't attempt to leave where you are...It's a terrible experience.⁵

To work underground alone was not only foolhardy but also forbidden in the workplace. Whether working in pairs or a group of four, miners, each with an assistant, moved through the confining shafts and tunnels, working the stopes at particular levels. Every man underground was responsible as far as possible for the safety of others: the miner at the face, the powder monkey in his 'exclusive' work, the shift boss at a particular level, and all who worked under their control. This applied also to others who worked underground, including unskilled truckers, rail line layers and timbermen. At the same time, carpenters, electricians, mechanics, and shift bosses who were generally promoted miners - worked underground, but not at the face. Large numbers of the labour force worked also on the surface at the vast complex of buildings, the chlorine shed, smelter, batteries, timber yard, brickworks and power station. They, too, were charged with observing the same law that demanded vigilance for the safety of their workmates.

The probability of a rock fall underground was a given and the prolonged howl of the hooter manifested a constant dread. Such a catastrophe might bring sudden entombment, death or maiming to mine workers for whom the eerie experience of

⁴ Fred Cole, 8 October 1992, MMOH.

⁵ Charlie Shannon, interview with the author, 10 September 1992, MMOH.

tunnelling below in near darkness perpetuated the fear, if unspoken, of working in an unnatural environment. Charlie Shannon recalled that:

They talked about the slide and the talking [the noises in the mine]...experienced miners, and they were good miners...they weren't fools, they were mature men, and I was young and said, 'What's that noise?' Old Jock said, 'Don't worry about that mate, you're safe when it's like that - it's talking...the mine is settling'. They called it 'talking'.⁶

It is probable the miners at the face were aware that on shift, they assumed the role of *dramatis personae* of the underground, their ritual performance of hewing the ore in dimly lit chambers the very stuff of mine mystique. Moreover, it is argued here that the enforced discipline and working class elitism of underground mining was synonymous with the performance, ritual or restraints of secret laws in town organisations.

For some, mateship remained a workplace trust, but for others, when the hooter sounded the end of shift, the power of mateship extended to the surface and away from the mine site. Many who spent their working days in dark tunnels and chambers did not adjust to a perceived mundane existence in domestic or community life. Whilst early shanties and hotels sold spirits, and three wine saloons operated at Tipperary Point, beer soon became more than a novelty in terms of consumption. Local folklore declares that at 'crib-time', the miners' meal-break, the shift boy might be sent to the nearest hotel for a 'cutter' of beer, from which each man of the particular surface shift drank his 'cut' during the break. The cutter was a miner's flask, long and narrow with handled lid that served as a cup.⁷ The practice defied a Company order that banned drinking liquor at the mine where, indeed, most miners outlawed the activity.⁸ Here was the paradox of the miner, to have concern for the safety of his workmates in time of crisis, but in

⁶ Shannon, 10 September 1992, MMOH.

⁷ Gertrude Marcombe, interview with the author, 3 March 1998, OH. Local lore suggests that Malcolm Ellis, Queensland author, lecturer and historian, was a Mount Morgan lad who 'ran the cutter'; see Rob Ogilvie, *The best days of your life: a centenary magazine of the 100 years 1887-1987 for the state schools of Mt. Morgan Shire*, Rockhampton, 1987, p. 56.

⁸ A lasting monument to the image of the Mount Morgan miner, 'running the cutter' is depicted in a Morgan Street statue of the 1980s and re-enacted in a race of the same name run during the annual Mount Morgan festival.

characteristic larrikin style, to demonstrate an 'enhanced masculinity' in lack of workplace care and his own safety.⁹ June Stoodley and Diane Menghetti declare that carelessness caused many accidents.¹⁰ Whilst confirming that contention, it is argued here that on occasion, rather than overt neglect or inefficiency, a miner's familiarity with dangerous situations might cause momentary relaxation of workplace vigilance.



Fig. 28. 'Workmates', 1920. Surface shift, note boys, front row left, hats, crib tins, 'Gladstone' bag.

Drinking to excess was a universal pastime at Mount Morgan as elsewhere. With the practice entrenched in their mining town culture, here miners also drank billies of beer. It was a matter of pride for a good drinker to consume three billies, but half a billy 'would make some men freak'.¹¹ Men drank at hotels and had their 'cutters' filled with beer to drink at home. Some sent their sons or paid other boys to 'run the cutter' to and

⁹ Andrew Metcalfe, 'Sex and solidarity', Terry Irving (ed.), *Challenges to Labour history*, Sydney, 1994, pp. 93, 95.

¹⁰ June Stoodley, *The Queensland gold miner in the late 19th century: his influence and his interests*, MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1968, p. 178; Diane Menghetti, *Charters Towers*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1984, note no. 56, p. 135.

¹¹ Court of Petty Sessions Mount Morgan (CPSMM), Deposition Book, 20 December 1897, CPS 7B/P4, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

from a hotel.¹² Others drank elsewhere, perhaps in 'Cutter Lane' adjacent to a hotel near the mine.¹³ Press reports confirm that men employed in similar trades or on a particular shift not only drank together but also attended celebrations at hotels that were places for leisure and mateship, but were meeting places of early fraternal associations:

One of those little ceremonies which go a long way towards cementing those ties that terminate in the brotherhood of man, happened on Saturday night last, when the moulders of the fitting shop entertained a number of co-workers who made the trip from Rocky for the shivoo. These fraternal gatherings are excellent from a man's viewpoint. The wife of his bosom holds a different opinion. The function eventuated at the Central, and host Anderson earned golden opinions for his efforts put forth to give the party a right royal time. After a number of toasts, songs and recitations were rendered...a bosker night.¹⁴

Social involvement away from the mine included religious and secular commitment. This was quite separate from the small-scale financial security against death or injury that paid up membership of benefit societies and lodges provided in the non-welfare era. The possibility of cave-ins was not the only aspect of mine safety miners preferred to ignore. Men tolerated the ghastly menace of phthisis to work the mine, while surface workers at the smelter were on the lowest wages of mine employment and worked in an environment where they inhaled chemical vapours from copper extraction. With slow reconstruction of unions after decimation in the 1890s strikes, local complaints were few from men who laboured where jobs were available. By 1901, miners tolerated conditions outwardly, but a call to arms by the press reinforced union undercurrents:

Strikes are quite proper, only strike right,
Strike for some purpose, but not for a fight;
Strike a good blow, when the iron is hot;
Strike, and keep striking, till you hit the right spot.¹⁵

¹² Marcombe, 3 March 1998, OH.

¹³ *Critic*, 12 May 1911.

¹⁴ *Critic*, 14 July 1911.

¹⁵ *Critic*, 18 September 1901.

Five years later, the situation at Mount Morgan was unchanged. The Brisbane *Worker* took up the matter of working conditions, publishing an item that 'shows what white men will face in order to earn a crust':

Mount Morgan Gold mining Co. are, on the whole, good employers. So much is readily admitted. But what about the health of the men employed in and about the copper smelting works? Strong, healthy young fellows in a few months become emaciated and subject to various diseases. Many, indeed, practically sign their own death-warrant[sic] by taking on the work. Such a condition of things is serious. Lives are more precious than copper.¹⁶

By 1914, the conservative *Morning Bulletin* reported on the condition of the smelter chimney where a large, deteriorated section of the flue had been removed but not replaced. Therefore, fumes were closer to the men, many of who were so overcome they were relieved from work. The engineer who supervised construction of the chimney declared that replacement would be required within two years. This did not occur.¹⁷ Thus, the workplace was dangerous on three counts: the extent of the miner's safety in terms of the actions of his workmates, workplace practice, physical environment, and the threat to health from unsanitary conditions and inhalation of ore dust and other dangerous substances. Despite requirements of the 1911 Royal Commission for improved ventilation in underground mines, Charlie Shannon, an apprentice in 1925, recalled that at Mount Morgan 'conditions weren't so hot' underground. His unintended pun described the humid conditions, 'ventilation...they'd come out and you'd swear they had been in a pool of water'. Apart from the bathroom at the Linda Works, the rest of the mine had poor facilities. Shannon explained:

At the Lindy bathroom, it was good...they had a 'heater', a single brick room with pipes around and stools to stand on, with heaters underneath. They had racks like an iron mattress, you put your [work] clothes on that, and they'd pull them up. The other Works had showers but their conditions were pretty primitive.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Worker*, 22 September 1906.

¹⁷ *MB*, 30 January 1914.

¹⁸ Shannon, 10 September 1992, MMOH. As discussed in chapter three, the Linda ('Lindy') tunnel opened in 1906 and was upgraded to a state-of-the-art facility by 1912. See Map. 3.

Accidental deaths at the mine occurred regularly and stirred inherent town resentment against mine directors and their fortunes in gold that by-passed a less than affluent town. By comparison with such wealth, a man who lost two fingers of a hand in a machinery accident might receive less than £2 from the Company as full compensation.¹⁹ Such situations continued despite demands for safety in the workplace and improved conditions of ventilation and sanitation. The calls escalated with the rise of organised labour and development in the character of mining trade unionism. By May 1908, miners at Mount Morgan attended a meeting at a location on Cemetery Road south of the mine, already the venue for meetings away from the workplace. James Crawford, Secretary of the Fitzroy Miners Union and aspiring politician, reported on the 'splendid roll-up' and consecutive meetings were held south of the town and north to Baree, a 'stronghold of conservatism'.²⁰ At the same time, evening meetings held under the Coronation Light netted large gatherings of interested locals and union supporters.

A 'general workers union' formed for all workers other than miners complemented the Fitzroy Miners Union. The organiser of the Australian Labour Federation, Charles Collins, envisaged that 'the Big Hill' would soon be a power for unionism. He also warned that the system of contract whereby increasingly, men competed against each other for periods of eight weeks, would cause prices to decline and intensify the hard conditions of labour. Collins asserted that the dust problem from rock drilling in the mine placed men's lives at risk and that a mining inspector should be stationed at Mount Morgan. Within months, this last suggestion became a critical issue at the mine.²¹

The circumstances of two multiple, fatal accidents underground in the 'Linda' shaft in September and November 1908 brought not only shock and horror, but also exacerbated current issues relating to work method and safety practice. Three methods

¹⁹ F. Cunningham, Underground accidents and H.P. Seale, B.Eng, 1908, typescript, 26 January 1977, MMHM.

²⁰ *Worker* 23 May 1908.

²¹ *Worker*, 30 May 1908.

of mining operated at the mine. These included a large open-cut to the 350 foot level, where by 1903, waste material was used to fill the worked out underground chambers. Square set timbering was the method used from the 350-foot level to the 650-foot level. The ore bodies on the 750 foot and 850-foot levels were mined in large open chambers. Less timber was required for the 'pigstye' system than the square set system. This



Fig. 29. Underground chamber, pigstye system, at least 750-foot level, timber floor, and unsupported head above. Figures of miners shown in centre and right chambers.

brings into focus the contract system where the minimum time for maximum output was of the essence to gangs. Shift boss Thomas Teague's comment that pigstye timbering 'had the approval of the bosses...as a good system for the men', hinted at workers' frustration with close timbering used in square sets. Conversely, in the pigstye system, a chamber might have thirty feet between the dyke and timber. This meant that in the chamber, between the face and the back filling area a large head of ore above or a dyke along the side of the chamber might be unsupported.²² As the face advanced, space behind the drive allowed for back filling. Moreover, wedges used to strengthen pigstye timbers were tightened frequently but tended to work loose after firing of explosives, so

²² *Accidents at Mount Morgan: minutes of evidence and appendices*, Brisbane, December 1908, p. iv, D15/542.1, CC/CQU.

weakening the support from timbering in the chamber. By contrast, reinforcement with additional timbers was an option with in situ square set timbering.

Adoption of the pigstye system at the mine resulted from a visit to the United States in 1903 by general manager Richard and mine manager H.P (Percy) Seale, when they studied the best methods of working the ore at deeper levels.²³ In his report to shareholders, Richard recommended:

the abandonment of expensive square sets in favour of pigstyes of rough timber and filling...a more economical method.²⁴

Within three years of introducing the pigstye system, and just two years before the 1908 fatalities, the Company insured for indemnity against mine fatality and accident.²⁵ Ironically, Richard was absent from Mount Morgan when the first multiple fatal accident occurred in 1908 and within two weeks, Seale became suddenly ill and died. A Mine Warden's Inquiry in September and a later Board of Inquiry in November 1908 were raised to investigate the causes of the disasters and to make recommendations for mining practice that might prevent the recurrence of similar accidents.²⁶ Richard declared in evidence at the Board of Inquiry that the pigstye system was more suitable than square-sets and more generally followed in important mines in America. He added that the decision to introduce the pigstye system was not based on economics and that no risks were taken in order to save costs. This directly contradicted his declaration in 1903 on the comparative costs of timbering.²⁷ A further anomaly in the issue concerned J. Bowie Wilson, who at Richard's invitation came to Mount Morgan as a graduate of the University of New South Wales and was a manager involved with introduction of the pigstye system. With Richard's seeming memory lapse, Wilson no longer at the

²³ Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited (MMGMC), *Annual Report*, no. 19, December 1904, D15/271.1, CC/CQU.

²⁴ MMGMC, *Annual Report*, no. 18, 1903, D15/271.1, CC/CQU.

²⁵ MMGMC, *Annual Report*, no. 21, 1907, D15/271.1, CC/CQU.

²⁶ *Accidents at Mount Morgan*, p. iii, D15/542.1, CC/CQU.

²⁷ *MB*, 6 November 1908.

mine and Seale deceased, the Board of Inquiry was unable to 'obtain definite evidence as to the reasons why the chamber and pigstye system was introduced'.²⁸

James Crawford represented the Fitzroy Miners Union at the Mine Warden's Inquiry. Thomas Teague, mentioned earlier, who had twenty years of experience at Mount Morgan and in 1908 worked at the 850 foot level, said in evidence, 'if they [mine bosses] had the slightest idea that a place was at all dangerous, an eye was kept on it.'²⁹ Teague's statement seems cavalier in terms of miners whose lives might be at risk, suggesting also that in places where danger was 'not thought to exist', they did not pay the same attention to the timbering wedges, lack of action that hints at nonchalance born of familiarity. The location of the first accident did not appear dangerous, but the vast 'head' or 'dyke' of ore that was the cause was not visible before the fall. Shift boss James Forbes³⁰ claimed he referred his concerns to the mine manager that between thirty and forty pigstyes[sic] were under the ground that fell, suggesting that pigstyes were unsafe. However, Forbes declared he

could not say that he [the mine manager] knew the ground that fell was dangerous; but he did not think it was advisable for me to go under the place when firing was being done. This was on account of the flat dyke above.³¹

Immediately after the November accident, mine workers and others rushed to the shaft, their urge to rescue victims a typical response to disaster. However, the blasé attitude of miners to their own safety did not deter mining inspector Howard Warde from his assessment of a dangerous situation where the massive fall of rock left no doubt that all five victims were dead. Mine manager James White, miners and others were frustrated at the time lapse between the fall and recovery of the bodies. Until Warde was certain that any attempt to descend the shaft and access the tunnel would not endanger the living, he refused permission for a rescue attempt to commence. Although

²⁸ *Accidents at Mount Morgan*, p. viii, D/15.521.1, CC/CQU.

²⁹ *MB*, 20 November 1908.

³⁰ *MB*, 18 November 1908.

³¹ *Accidents at Mount Morgan*, p. vi, D15/542.1, CC/CQU.

White and Warde did not leave the scene for thirty-six hours, the angst of men prevented from going to the aid of their mates challenged Warde's caution.³²

Fresher men from the surface to replace them, and they're hauled up on top for a blow;
 When a life-and-death job is doing there's room only for workers below.
 Bare-armed and bare-chested and brawny, with a grim, meaning set of the jaw,
 The relay hurries off to the rescue, caring not for a danger a straw;
 Tis not toil but a battle they're called to, and like Trojans the miners respond,
 For a dead man lies crushed neath the timbers, or a live man is choking beyond.³³

The Rescue
 Edward Dyson

With the last body brought to the surface, James White addressed the rescuers gathered at the top of the shaft. He thanked the 'five hundred men' who had worked shifts underground in gangs of twenty. His appreciation was warm if in paternalistic, management tone:

James White: 'I have to thank you all, *my men*,³⁴ for your heroic and courageous help to me in this heavy task. Mr. Warde and myself had little differences today; but you know that Mr. Warde's suggestions were all to safeguard life. I want to thank you all for sticking to me right through.'
 A voice: 'We will always stick to you and follow you.' (Loud voices of assent.)
 Another voice: 'You are a hero yourself, Jim.'³⁵

White's expression of gratitude to those who risked their lives to bring the victims up from the disaster level was a trite, if ritualistic acknowledgment of the men's commitment to their mates. Yet, in collapsing time to understand the atmosphere of depression after the macabre and exhausting 'rescue' of the victims it seems the men acknowledged White's appreciation by displaying their confidence in his leadership and their loyalty to him alone.

The bravery of those who played their parts in the retrieval of the dead was acknowledged and applauded. However, between the second and third falls in the

³² *Daily Record*, (DR), 7 November 1908.

³³ Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing, *Australian Bush Ballads*, Sydney, 1955, pp. 94, 95.

³⁴ Author emphasis.

³⁵ *MB*, 7 November 1908.

November disaster one miner, Jock Shields, risked his own life to descend in an ore shaft and lead out two trapped miners. He became the singular hero of the disasters, the press acclaiming his feat to overshadow all other efforts. This suggests the impact of individual heroism, whether in war or civilian life. His reward for bravery was the prestigious and rarely presented Edward Medal.³⁶ Counterpoint to the romantic significance of victim or hero, miners who collectively aspired to fair wages and conditions received scant notice in the press until industrial conflict erupted between men, management and unions.³⁷

The comments of mine workers regarding the method of timbering at the mine were not publicised in the press, but in union handbills distributed locally. Crawford also pursued the cause of safety in the workplace, advertising that:

A mass meeting of mine workers will be held at the corner of Cemetery-road and Crown Street at 5.30 pm. today (Saturday) when returning from the funeral. Business: to protest against the continuance of the pigsty [sic] system of mining. Wives and mothers should attend. J. Crawford, Secretary, F.M.U.³⁸

The rarity of a Mount Morgan advertisement that requested the attendance of women confirms the significance of the issue. Moreover, the reference to 'wives and mothers' in the *Morning Bulletin* indicates a union press release rather than Mount Morgan or Rockhampton journalism, which did not refer to mine women. The meeting framed a formal protest to management against the use of pigstye timbering in chambers, and a declaration that miners would not resume work until the system was abandoned. General manager Richard agreed to progressive change, so the men returned to work when mining inspector Warde and mine manager White considered the levels were safe.

³⁶ *Critic*, 18 November 1908.

³⁷ *Worker*, 9 January 1904.

³⁸ *MB*, 7 November 1908.

One of the men trapped in the November fall did not perish and relived his ghastly experience in evidence to the Board of Inquiry. He was Michael Lyons, a young married miner who was with his gang in a chamber where they were using bragalow timber to construct pigstyes. A dangerous rock was pointed out in the centre of the stope and Louis Moore, who was an experienced practical miner and, according to a shift boss 'would have been alert for any danger', called to Lyons, 'Come over here'. They both listened and Lyons heard 'a bit of a rip not very much' and no more than he had heard many times before when pigstyes were used. Moore said, 'We had better get out' and men began to move away. A grinding and cracking noise 'talking' was the common warning but on this occasion, the noise immediately before the fall 'was like the rush of compressed air'.³⁹ Three men, Moore, Martin and Lyons were last, but suddenly everything seemed to collapse. Martin was ahead of Lyons, and was the first to be struck and killed. Lyons fell beside him 'after a clip on the head' and the fingers of his right hand became pinned beneath Martin's foot and fallen rock. He lay still for about ten minutes before managing to extricate himself from Martin's body. Moore died in the fall also but a witness at the Inquiry declared that at that level, he, like Louis Moore 'would not have hurried out'.⁴⁰ The Board of Inquiry in November 1908 heard the evidence of 55 witnesses including 34 miners, but 'did not find any party or parties guilty of wrongdoing or neglect'. However, the Inquiry stressed that in view of the evidence and their personal inspection of the mine:

The increasing frequency of the dykes...their erratic course...so much more apparent by the last accident, as well as the presence of flaws and heads disclosed as work proceeded...drastic modification of the system of mining is necessary in certain parts of the ore body,...this should have earlier engaged the attention of the Management...⁴¹

³⁹ *MB*, 5 November 1908.

⁴⁰ *Accidents at Mount Morgan*, p. vii, D15/542.1, CC/CQU.

⁴¹ *Accidents at Mount Morgan*, p. viii, D15/542.1, CC/CQU.

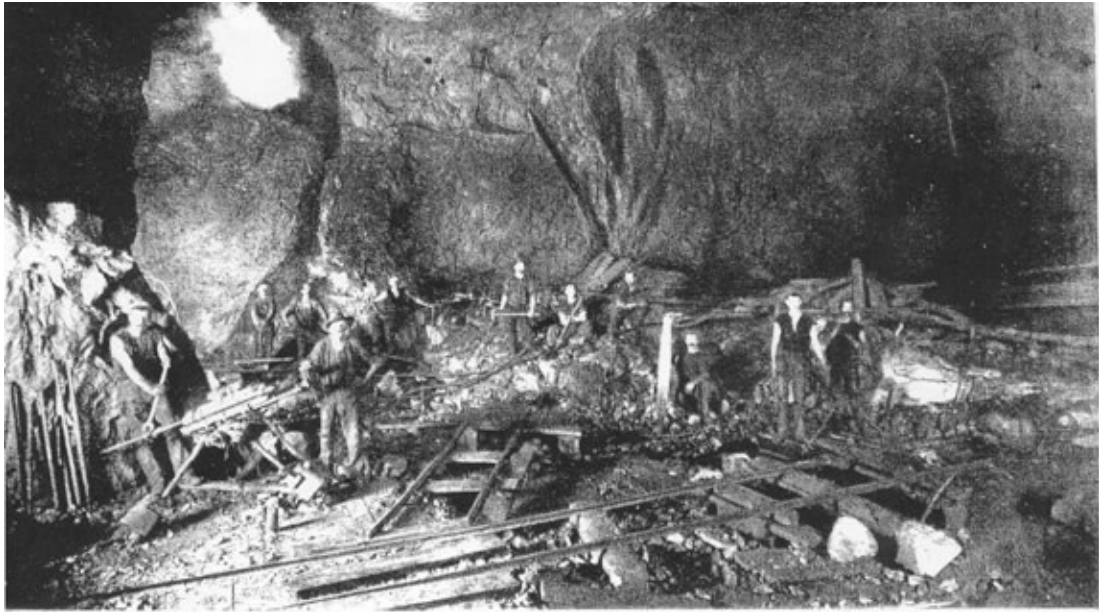


Fig. 30. Mount Morgan mine, 850-foot level, c. 1909. Preparing a copper chamber for square sets.

The Inquiry recommended abandonment of the pigstye system in favour of the square set system and that more attention should be paid to mullocking and closer filling of depleted stopes rather than relying on timber supports. The Inquiry did not consider that the use of brigalow timber should cease – it was available in the local district and thus cheaper than hardwood in terms of cutting and transport to the mine. Thus the use of brigalow continued despite the opposition of underground men and the mining inspector.⁴² Management insistence on the use of brigalow for timbering became a hallmark of dispute during industrial unrest, although safety issues did not diminish the importance of wages and conditions.

Comprehensive reportage of each disaster and its aftermath continued in the conservative *Morning Bulletin*⁴³ contrasted with succinct reports in the non-conservative *Critic* of union efforts to increase local membership:

Our town is still in the throes of the mine disaster, and nothing else, with the exception of the Union, is spoken about. The latter has come right to the front in one jump as it were.⁴⁴

⁴² *Mount Morgan Chronicle (MMC)*, 2 January 1914.

⁴³ *MB*, 17 September 1908.

⁴⁴ *Critic*, 13 November 1908.

In the immediate period of post-accident trauma, a 'novel gathering' was a 'smoke concert for "Old Timers"' held at the School of Arts.⁴⁵ Three hundred attended the event, including the general manager of the mine, George Anderson Richard and local member Henry Cowap, MLA, (Fitzroy, 1902-1909).⁴⁶ A traditional mining title, 'Captain' was accorded to Richard when the board appointed him general manager. However, he assumed the title earlier when as a member of the Queensland Volunteers he was appointed 'Acting Captain' before proceeding to Barcaldine during the 1891 shearers' strike. Richard did not see active Volunteer service, nor was he a mine 'Captain' *per se*. He did not go underground, declaring that he was 'not a miner and did not like poking about in another man's work'. The title remained the mark of his public persona, and used by senior staff and Company hierarchy, but miners and shift bosses addressed him as 'Skipper'.⁴⁷ For his part, Labor member Henri Cowap was a miner, member of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and the first Mount Morgan candidate to be elected to the Queensland government.⁴⁸ The smoke concert was the scene of many toasts and speeches as past mine employees were honoured, whilst the hyperbole and rhetoric asserted high regard for upper management and the mine's benefits to the town. Richard was self-deprecating in his response, assuring the old-timers he was one of them.

The connotations of the smoke concert might seem bizarre in terms of the time it was held: within a fortnight of two multiple, fatal disasters at the mine. However, whilst the accidents were not mentioned officially at the concert, perhaps the old miners present preferred that the mourning remained an inward grief. Yet they probably expected that danger and death at the mine would continue. As speakers at the concert

⁴⁵ *MB*, 23 November 1908.

⁴⁶ *Queensland Parliamentary Handbook*, Brisbane, 1983, p. 236.

⁴⁷ *Queensland Government Gazette*, no. 10, vol. LIV, November 1891, p. 1104; *MB*, 23 November 1908.

⁴⁸ D.B. Waterson and John Arnold, *Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1930-1980, with outline atlas of Queensland electorates, 1859-1980*, Canberra, 1982.

looked to the past rather than the present; one swore his loyalty to the mine and that he knew men 'still working for the Company who did not find one fault with it'.⁴⁹

The town moved to overcome unsafe work practices and to increase technical expertise at the mine. The School of Arts⁵⁰ committee promoted an institutional ethic of self-improvement and requested Company support for a scheme to establish a School of Mines in town. The contrary Richard refuted the suggestion, declaring that classes at such an institution would not provide technical instruction appropriate to mining. Yet, Richard's family history suggests that he attended the Ballarat School of Mines.⁵¹ Undaunted, the Mount Morgan committee arranged for some trades instruction at the School of Arts; but classes were necessarily sporadic as they depended upon the availability and expertise of local tradesmen as instructors. By 1909, the committee demanded a state technical school for the town. Richard supported the move and the Mount Morgan Technical College opened in 1909 with mine staff providing technical instruction to prepare students for trades training at the Works.⁵²

Those for whom technical education was possible bonded later with their apprenticeship peers. Some aspired to promotion in the trades or to staff, which would separate them from the majority of mine workers, particularly surface men who were unskilled and worked under the guidance and authority of tradesmen. Some trades were required underground but the qualifications for miners at the face were hard work, courage, perhaps fatalism, and an elitism that guarded against penetration of their ranks.

⁴⁹ MB, 21 November 1908.

⁵⁰ Philip Candy, 'The light of heaven itself: the contribution of the institutes to Australian cultural history', P.C. Candy and J. Laurent, *Pioneering culture: Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia*, Adelaide, 1994, pp. 2, 3.

⁵¹ Stephen Little, interview with the author, 17 September 1999, OH.

⁵² Norman F. White, speech at Mount Morgan Technical College, 1909, M14/1563.3, CC/CQU.



Fig. 31. Science and trades rooms at Mount Morgan Technical College, 1918.

The expansion of male bonding in the workplace and the unionism that emerged rapidly at Mount Morgan in the early 1900s predicated union surges at the mine following the fatal disasters in 1908.⁵³ The march of unionism contradicts the comments of general manager Richard who visited Sydney in July 1910, his comments to the press suggesting that top management preferred to ignore unionism, or adopt a 'wait and see' attitude to any evidence of worker solidarity. The press reported Richard's statement that in all departments at the mine, 'they live in peace and contentment, eschewing unionism,' whilst he was also quoted directly:

We have never had a strike there. We never let our men get discontented. The employer can meet the demand for higher wages which now exists by higher efficiency. You cannot make more money by taking it from the men or browbeating them. The proper way is to get more out of your concern by raising the standard of efficiency. All our departments at Mount Morgan are highly organised, nothing being wasted.⁵⁴

Richard also espoused the introduction of a scheme for miners who were ageing and approaching the time when they would be unfit for mining. The Company planned to 'put them on the land' where ample agricultural land was available in the Rockhampton region. The Queensland government originated the scheme and management negotiated for special conditions whereby miners need not reside on their holdings for five years. Under the policy, they would have time to prepare the land before ceasing work at the mine. With farming the antithesis of mining, management also suggested the availability of expert agricultural assistance to the new landholders. Whether the Company anticipated 'expert assistance' from the State Experimental Farm at Warren near Kabra is not known.⁵⁵ Mark Kelly was a shift boss at the Mundic Works who left the mine in July 1911 to take up farming in the Malchi district near Gracemere,

⁵³ Edward Stokes, *United we stand: impressions of Broken Hill 1909-1910: recollections and photographs from the period*, Canterbury, 1983, p. 4. The strike at Broken Hill in 1909 was a profound example of solidarity in unionism.

⁵⁴ *MB*, 30 July 1910.

⁵⁵ Lorna McDonald, *Rockhampton: a history of city and district*, St. Lucia, 1981, p. 69; Centenary of Stanwell State School 1876-1976, typescript, 1976, held privately.

between Kabra and Rockhampton. His entire shift accorded him a rousing farewell and presentation at the Grand Hotel.⁵⁶

Progressively, the widespread industrial conflict spurred by increasing union influence brought relations between workers and employers to a turning point in 1911. Within months of Richard's declaration of satisfaction with relations between mine and men, a local branch of the Amalgamated Worker's Association held its first meeting in December 1910. Labor member E. (Ted) Theodore represented Mount Morgan at a Townsville conference where a large attendance gave majority support for union amalgamation.⁵⁷ The Amalgamated Workers' Association made such rapid strides at Mount Morgan in one month that the association was declared the key to 'emancipation, financial position, numerical strength and ever increasing power of members.'⁵⁸ Increasing 'by hundreds' in Central Queensland, the Association urged waverers to vote 'yes' on the approaching federal referendum on arbitration.⁵⁹ In counterpoint to this, the local press published under their 'Union Matters' header the reactionary writings of 'Miner' that warned of the growing politicising of the Amalgamated Workers Association and calling for a:

Non-political mine and works employees association. Meeting of miners and other employees of Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company. At the Masonic Hall, Friday 31 March 1911, to form the above association - a purely sectional union.⁶⁰

Union organiser Jack Moir issued a challenge through the press for public debate on the issue of a 'Sectional Union' that he declared would jeopardise miners' interests and 'be dubbed a scab union'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Critic*, 21 July 1911.

⁵⁷ *Worker*, 10 December 1910.

⁵⁸ *Critic*, 24 March 1911.

⁵⁹ *Critic*, 24 March, 14 July 1911

⁶⁰ *Critic*, 24 March 1911.

⁶¹ *Critic*, 30 March 1911.

Coincidentally, the strike by sugar workers deepened to such a level by July 1911 that Mount Morgan held a benefit for strikers. The event at the Olympia picture theatre saw the manager donate half the proceeds 'to the battlers of the sugar fields'.⁶² Three weeks later, the sugar strike was over, but a strike at Tasmania's Mt. Lyell mine where some Mount Morgan shareholders also held shares reflected an attack on unionism.⁶³ Strike action was avoided at Mount Morgan in 1911, but mutterings swelled among the ranks in bitter condemnation of the wealth of gold yield that made scant impact on the town or, essentially, on miners' pockets. This was borne out early in 1912 by a strident union demand:

All workers at the copper works are requested to attend a meeting at the AWA Hall on Sunday, the 27 August at 11 o'clock. Business important.⁶⁴

With a protest for increased wages and conditions organised at the meeting, the smelter men – mostly unskilled labourers who were union members - ceased work and immediately, non-unionists from the mine's limestone quarry at Marmor volunteered to assist in continuing work at Mount Morgan. For its part, management 'gained experience in combatting such an outbreak' when they monitored the loyalty of the men and the strength of the unions. Archer wrote:

Strike matters are very quiet at Mount Morgan, notwithstanding the strike camp, hoisting of the Red Flag and the usual speechifying. The only new feature is the number of fights – our men are tired of being called scabs and are taking the law into their own hands in a forcible manner.⁶⁵

Union representatives suggested a conference with Richard who, according to Archer:

was politely ignoring them and is at his best in tactfully managing a situation such as the present...the strong personal influence of Captain Richard was very marked. Nearly all the trouble arose from the younger element, the so called 'twenty oners'.⁶⁶

⁶² *Critic*, 18 August 1911.

⁶³ Geoffrey Blainey, *The peaks of Lyell*, Carlton, 1967; *Critic*, 24 March 1911.

⁶⁴ *Critic*, 25 August 1911.

⁶⁵ R.S. Archer to R.G. Casey, 24 February 1912, Letter Book 1904-1912, K 1014, Archer Collection, Mitchell Library (ML).

⁶⁶ Archer to Casey, 11 February 1912, K1014, ML.

The board of directors wired Richard to 'sit tight' on negotiations, and 'keep the unions at more than arm's length'.⁶⁷ Richard ignored the directive, met with representatives of union and men, and as a result, the men resumed work pending a decision on establishment of a regional wages board. Richard realised such a move would deplete Company bargaining power, but, as he advised the directors, he could see no other solution. Now Archer scoffed that Richard was a general manager nervous of offending the men and 'getting the Company blacklisted'. However, the men returned to work, loyal employees receiving preference and others were reinstated in order of application.⁶⁸ From that time, Richard's position was under threat. The board directed him to close the 'unprofitable' Mundic Works and put off three hundred and forty men; but he persevered with the operation after limiting dismissals to forty employees. Archer was appointed managing director in April 1912 and his first task was to dispense with Richard, who the board insisted must resign or face dismissal. The acrimonious circumstances of his reluctant resignation to Archer in May 1912 were not made public⁶⁹ and the first local information that Richard was to leave the mine fell 'like a bomb' among the townspeople:

Captain Richard, like most men, had many faults. To an enemy he was merciless, but there are many men today who owe their present positions, not to their ability, but to the goodwill of the Captain...at no time did he advocate a reduction in wages...sooner or later the pruning knife will be applied and dozens who loll in cosy, fat, sleek billets will be asked to work, or leave.⁷⁰

The new general manager was Benjamin Magnus, (1912-1914) an American who visited the mine as a smelter expert in 1907, when he was entertained by Richard and family. Magnus was the initial manager of the Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Company of Australia Limited (ER&S) that opened at Newcastle in 1909, but the operation that became a national icon of ore treatment was Richard's brain-child of 1904

⁶⁷ G. Westacott, 'Mount Morgan in Richard's Day', *MB*, 24 July 1950.

⁶⁸ Archer to Casey, 18 March 1912, K1014, ML.

⁶⁹ Archer to Kelso King, 12 May 1912, K1014, ML.

⁷⁰ *Critic*, 10 May 1912.

to 1906.⁷¹ The reputedly arrogant Magnus moved immediately to cut labour and production costs. During his first week at the mine, four staff 'who were being kept on with practically nothing to do at a cost of £700 odd per annum' were dismissed and more significantly, 78 men from the Top Works were 'let go'. Within two weeks, 140 men were dismissed, the town stunned at the ruthless manner in which they were 'sent down the hill'. Archer wrote to director R.G. Casey:

fifty per cent of them were practically pensioners, being sent up there when unfit from eye infirmities for underground work. They too must have been unprofitable to us for some time.⁷²

The cause of infirmities was of no interest to management and Archer advised director Kelso King that it seemed resettlement by the Company of those who could no longer work 'in the front line' came too late. The 'eye infirmities' to which Archer referred suggest the condition of nystagmus, a flickering of the eye that hampered vision. By 1924, *The Queensland Government Mining Journal* reported that the infirmity resulted from working in poor light and in a crouched position.⁷³ A later issue of the *Journal* reported that medical research suggested the complaint might be psychological and caused by fear of the environment and confined spaces.⁷⁴

Mine workers and Works staff perceived Magnus as the enemy, his actions the subject of town angst and denigrating journalism. He was the butt of cynical jokes and nicknames coined in the local press while erudite prose told the situation:

The hand of Magnus is over all things in Mount Morgan. On Saturday last I saw a file of men, old in the service of the Company that has turned out millionaires, file down from the mountain top. They who had built up the divvys, who in many cases had given their lives in return for a miserable wage, passed out, probably - nay, most likely - never to return.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited, (MMGMC), *Annual Report*, no. 19, November 1904; *Annual Report*, no. 21, December 1906, D15/271.1, CC/CQU.

⁷² Archer to Casey, 14 May 1912, K 1014, ML.

⁷³ *Queensland Government Mining Journal (QGMJ)*, 15 February 1924, pp. 59, 60.

⁷⁴ *QGMJ*, 15 March 1924, pp. 76, 77, 15 August 1924, pp. 290.

⁷⁵ *Critic*, 24 May, 31 May 1912.

that he had served his purpose. His leaving was orchestrated in a manner similar to that used against every Company officer who in the past had charge of the mine and management, whatever his title: superintendent, manager, managing director, director, or general manager, and irrespective of his skills. Magnus' abrasive attitude was a natural character flaw that alienated him from business associates, whether the Rockhampton Harbour Board, or Mrs. Rockwell, a respected Mount Morgan identity and housekeeper at his mine residence. Although the spectre of the Magnus experience remained after his ignominious departure, the extent of his authority seems uncertain. His control was not autonomous; orders for the sackings that devastated a workforce and town were initiated by the board and delivered to Magnus by Archer.⁸⁰ Moreover, changes Magnus introduced that included demolition and rebuilding at the Works were the orders that Richard refused to implement. During a period of flux that saw two general managers and one managing director pass through top management, the board planned a permanent appointment. This occurred with the arrival from Broken Hill in 1913 of Scottish engineer Adam Alexander Boyd, a quietly efficient but strong mine manager. He was groomed for higher authority, appointed acting general manager in July 1915 and general manager six months later.⁸¹

Industrial unrest festered from 1911, through the shortlived strike of 1912 during Magnus' management when unionists at the mine, the Company's coal operations at Many Peaks, and limestone quarry at Marmor supported the widespread railway strike. Further problems of manpower arose with the enlistment in 1914 of 420 from the Mount Morgan mine and its satellite operations, Many Peaks, Marmor and Iron Island.⁸² Industrial discontent erupted again in September 1915, when a representative group rejected management's proposed wages agreement as 'not good enough' and, according to managing director Archer, intended to demand proposals 'until they got one soft

⁸⁰ Archer to Casey, 27 May 1912, Letter Book, K1014, ML.

⁸¹ MMGMC, *Annual Report*, no. 30, vol. 2, 1915, D15/271.2, CC/CQU.

⁸² MMGMC, *Annual Report*, no. 31, vol. 2, 1916, D15/271.2, CC/CQU.

enough to suit them'.⁸³ Boyd, with experience as mine manager at Broken Hill during the strike of 1909, stood firm against the demands. The men held a mass meeting and talked 'strike', but decided to postpone further action until after the unsuccessful Industrial Peace Court award was rescinded.⁸⁴

Dissension simmered until erupting again in 1917 when, in fulfilment of a promise made at the beginning of World War 1, Boyd employed returned soldiers, whether or not they were union members.⁸⁵ By mid-1916, eighteen returned men, ten of whom were wounded and eight others who were not former employees, were engaged at the mine.⁸⁶ For example, H.A. Foster, unionist in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers wrote through the press that he was an electrical apprentice at the mine when he enlisted. He served for eighteen months until blinded in one eye when on active duty. Returning later to the mine, he worked at full tradesman's wages as an armature winder. The shift boss asked him on several occasions if the work was suitable and Foster admitted finally that his sight impairment was a problem. He transferred to a better position at a wage increase of one shilling per day. Foster contacted a number of 'comrades' who had returned from active service, and all expressed satisfaction with their re-employment at the mine.⁸⁷

In the days following Easter 1917, the day shift of miners refused to go into the mine. Moreover, afternoon and night shifts did not appear at the site. However, the union declared that furnace workers must work shift to close down the furnaces safely. They ceased work the following day. The men were unable to 'pick management's attitude' but the union advised strikers that Boyd would give preference to unionists, but

⁸³ Archer to W.G. Thompson, 24 September 1915, K1015, ML.

⁸⁴ MMGMC, *Annual Report*, vol. 2, no. 30, 1915, D15/271.2, CC/CQU.

⁸⁵ *MB*, 16 April 1917.

⁸⁶ MMGMC, The Mount Morgan dispute, April-May 1917, D15/311.3, CC/CQU.

⁸⁷ *MB*, 26 April 1917.

would stand firm on re-engaging men who had enlisted, on the premise that *that* was the only matter in dispute⁸⁸

The stoppage had immediate effect on the town. The streets were quiet. The Rockhampton press reported:

The moulders were sent home yesterday afternoon, there being no further work for them to do without the assistance of labourers. Today is an ordinary pay day, but the town is remarkably quiet. It is a 'short' pay owing to the plant having been closed for four days at Easter. While the present number of men are out of work, the pay cheque will be reduced by one thousand pounds. Only a small proportion of the men who are not at work have any time in for the next pay.⁸⁹

James Lovell, branch president of the Australian Workers' Union at Mount Morgan, declared that by disregarding award provisions whereby miners received preference over non-unionists, management caused a lockout. For its part, the non-Labor press also berated the union that:

The chairman Lovell is inconsistent. In one breath, he champions the cause of those non-unionists who were refused work last year and in the next breath he denies any interest in the Industrial Workers of the World members or its cause.⁹⁰

During the dispute, two sons of union member W. Gregory were refused renewal of union tickets when they failed to present their 1916 tickets. A further attempt failed, the reason unstated but described as 'piffling'. The Gregorys challenged the union constitution that claimed no unreasonable conditions were to be imposed upon the continuance of membership, and would not subject members to tyranny or oppression. The Gregorys went to the local press who questioned why the issue of union tickets ceased when the industrial conflict surfaced in Mount Morgan on 16 April. In fact, the books closed with the stoppage that the men called a lockout.⁹¹ Moreover, a meeting on 26 April saw members who wanted to speak howled down or drowned out by traditional

⁸⁸ MB, 28 April 1917.

⁸⁹ MB, 20 April 1917.

⁹⁰ MB, 30 April 1917.

⁹¹ MB, 27 April 1917.

foot stamping of a section of the meeting that a union official termed 'this hooliganism'.

The Rockhampton non-Labor press condemned the stoppage and the union:

When a member of an organisation 400 strong cannot get a fair deal at a meeting, or be allowed a few minutes to explain his views (whatever they may be) he must find the next best way he can be heard, and not be insulted by a mob of hooligans. No better place exists than the press.⁹²

A week after the first cease work, more than 1 400 members of the Australian Workers' Union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Progressive Carpenters' Union and the Federated Clerks' Union attended a meeting at and outside the School of Arts on the night of 24 April 1917, the eve of the second Anzac Day celebration. A strike was declared later that evening at a local industrial council meeting held at St. Mary's Institute, made available for the use of unions during the conflict.⁹³ The local secretary of the Australian Workers' Union, acting under instruction from the Brisbane executive, advised the men to strike, for which voting was allegedly by a show of hands⁹⁴ although later, the Brisbane executive contradicted the allegation.

The Engine Drivers' Association and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers that included electricians, fitters and turners, were not allied with the Australian Workers' Union but, unless miners, labourers and timbermen produced ore, work for other unionists ceased. The ore stockpile at the mine was sufficient only for the immediate needs of the furnaces and when stocks were exhausted, the converters closed down. The 20 members of the Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association who continued at the Works kept the mine clear of water but within days, went out after a union ballot among members showed 89 in favour of strike to 41 against. At the same time, the strike committee declared the mine and works 'black'.⁹⁵

⁹² *MB*, 26 April 1917.

⁹³ *MB*, 24 April 1917.

⁹⁴ *Brisbane Courier Mail*, (BC), 30 April 1917.

⁹⁵ *MB*, 2 May 1917.

By 6 May 1917, the unions involved in the strike and the Company were summoned to a conference at the Mount Morgan Court House on 7 May 1917 before Mr. Justice McCawley, President of the Arbitration Court. On the day of the conference, union pickets at the mine gate intercepted Company officials on the way to the mine and declared that was the last occasion when anyone would be allowed to go to or leave the works, irrespective of who they were. The action contravened strike committee orders and the union executive instructed pickets that the officials must not be confronted for any reason.

The conference could not reach a compromise. Mr. Justice McCawley adjourned the matter to the court for the next day, when evidence was taken before a public gallery. The President declared that any non-unionists who required a hearing had the opportunity of stating their case and cross-examining witnesses. However, non-unionists did not appear before the court. Amid extensive submissions and evidence, a main contention for preference was unionists' refusal to bear upkeep of non-unionists under awards secured to which non-unionists had not contributed, but in which they shared. Conversely, general manager Boyd gave evidence that management was only interested in securing the best men for the mine and did not discriminate between unionists and non-unionists. Boyd added that preference would cause many mineworkers to leave town rather than become unionists. Subsequently, McCawley brought down his decision to award preference to unionists, whereby returned non-unionists already employed remained employed and the Company might employ other returned soldiers so long as *all* employees became union members. The strike was declared off and work resumed immediately.⁹⁶

The first evidence of possible permanent closure of the mine was in 1921 when employees were asked to accept a 20 per cent reduction in wages. Boyd sent an open

⁹⁶ MB, 8, 9 April 1917.

letter to union representatives, declaring the purpose of the request was to counteract the costs of production including wages, fluxes, fuels and general stores that had escalated since 1915.⁹⁷ Analysis of the officially declared costs reveals that, over the period 1914-1920, the average rate of wages per shift for a miner increased by 60 per cent, and for truckers, shovellers and others, by 48 per cent.⁹⁸ Compared to this, sales of production had decreased so markedly that the mine was not viable. Moreover, expectations of future improvement in the copper market were barely marginal, and the gold price continued to decline. The strategist Boyd was careful to point out that 54 per cent of labour production costs was wages for employees in other areas of Queensland: timbergetters, coal miners, coke burners, railway men, seamen and lumpers. The balance of 46 per cent production cost comprised the wages of Mount Morgan mine employees.

Unionists at the mine were mostly members of the Australian Workers Union and included miners, labourers, sawyers, platelayers, storemen, truckers, furnacemen, horse drivers, watchmen, tablemen, vessel liners and bracemen.⁹⁹ Notwithstanding Boyd's rationale, the men were 'looking for wages...wanting more money'.¹⁰⁰ The dispute went to arbitration in May 1921, when Mr. Justice McCawley advised the men to accept Boyd's offer.¹⁰¹ The unions urged the casting of a 'No' vote when a mass meeting of employees attended a poll at the Mount Morgan Court House on 4 May. A 70 per cent negative vote won the private ballot, yet indicated that not every member complied with union demands. By rejecting Boyd's proposal, the men found the mine remained closed for 362 days from February 1921 until February 1922.

⁹⁷ MMGMC, A.A. Boyd to mine employees: Why we suggested 20% reduction of Wages, 18 April 1921, Hartley papers, 1921, D/15 281, CC/CQU.

⁹⁸ MMGMC, Average earnings of contractors per shift 1914-1920, 19 February 1921, Hartley papers, D15/281, CC/CQU.

⁹⁹ MMGMC, Correspondence - shut-down period, 1921-22, D/15 278.5, CC/CQU.

¹⁰⁰ MMGMC, Boyd letter, D15/281, CC/CQU.

¹⁰¹ MMGMC, *Annual Report*, no.36, vol. 2, 1921, D15/289, CC/CQU.

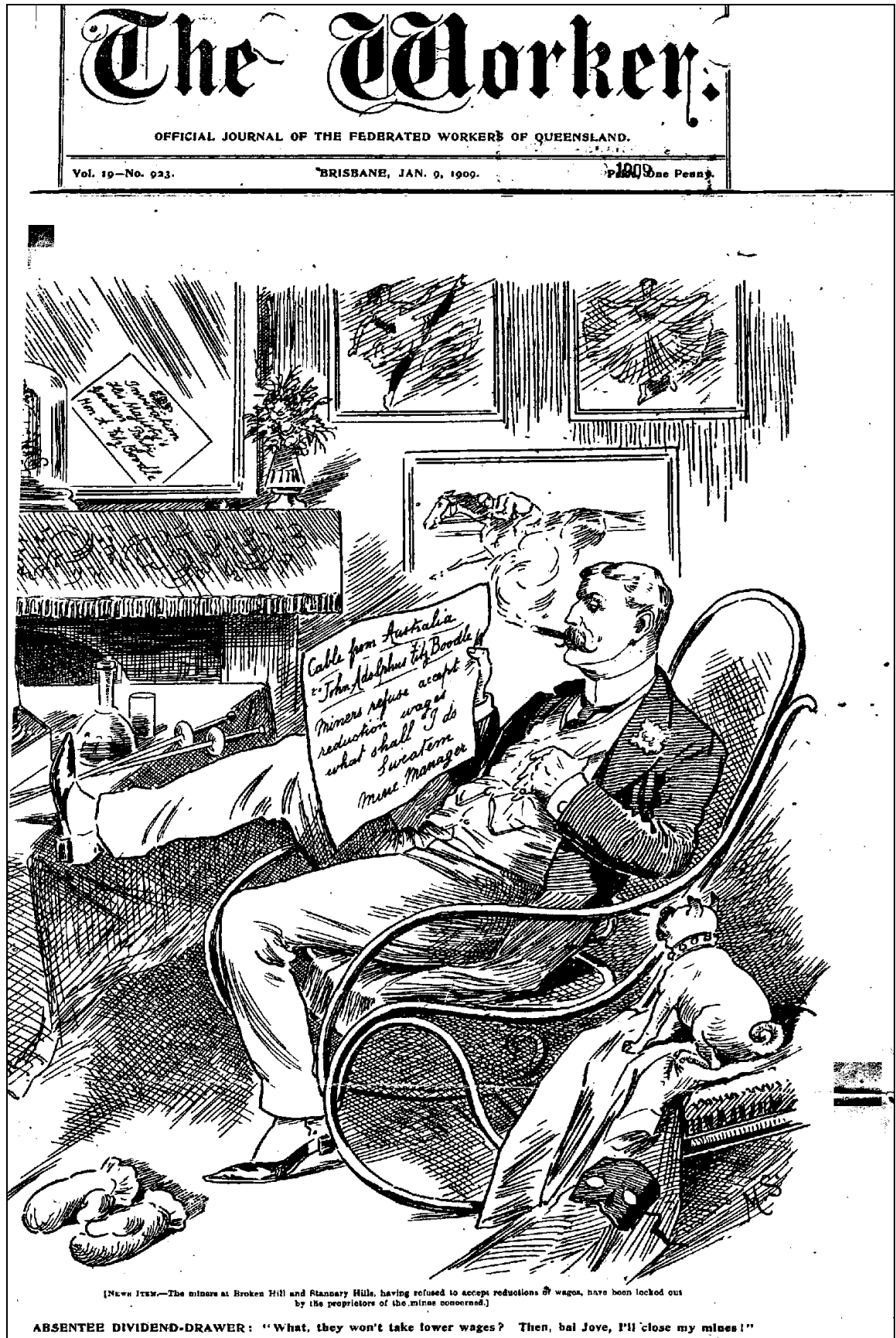


Fig. 32. Broken Hill 1909 revisited: déjà vu in industrial relations during the Mount Morgan 'lockout', 1921.

As arbitration dealt progressively with industrial unrest the Amalgamated Engineers' Union Division 1 was concerned that the wages set by the Arbitration Court were so low that they would not attract fitters or other trades to the central district. By January 1924, the organising delegate, Robert Lyle secured several tradesmen fitters for the mine through his Rockhampton office, but three were not retained at Mount Morgan and barely earned their expenses to and from the town. Two months later,¹⁰² management advertised openly for turners. The union acted immediately non-tradesmen were paid at tradesmen's rates to do the work of fitters. Lyle met with the mine chief engineer, who promised to put fitters back on the job 'when available'.

Employment and wages issues did not arise only within private enterprise. The Mount Morgan railway workshop foreman employed a labourer for fitter's work on a Sunday, but oddly, Lyle merely warned the railways of 'serious consequences' should the situation occur again. However, the private employer's attitude of non-compliance with awards and union demands was common practice. For example, management's long-standing business associate, Burns and Twigg, Rockhampton, fabricated heavy machinery and other equipment for the mine. They paid gazetted rates only after regular union pressure from Lyle and in 1924, defaulted on payment of six days annual leave for employees. Lyle intervened also for mine apprentices who were not paid for gazetted holidays during leave time; but management declared that as the apprentices were already on leave, gazetted holidays during the period did not cause them to lose time!¹⁰³ Union membership was optional for apprentices, but Henry Stock, an early apprentice fitter and turner at the mine joined the apprenticeship section of the union so he was eligible for sick pay. Stock declared that 'in those days, the unions were not as tough as they are now'.¹⁰⁴ Many members were not interested in their unions, but

¹⁰² Robert M. Lyle, *Amalgamated Engineers Union Monthly Report (AEU)*, Brisbane, March 1924, p. 17.

¹⁰³ MMGMC, Apprenticeship register, 1921-1927, D15/288.8, CC/CQU. Henry Stock, interview with Carol Gistitin, July 1989, OH, CC/CQU.

¹⁰⁴ *MB*, 27 May 1925.

attended meetings because, as a labourer recalled, 'they would have fined me otherwise'.¹⁰⁵

On 24 September 1924, disgruntled men marched to their scene of conflict - the mine - to demand wage claims. A seeming victory was brief and, in the aftermath of a wordy exchange, the 'army' of strikers disbanded in disarray. Three months later, trades work was an urgent issue when Lyle represented Mount Morgan members in their bid to change methods of shift working. Hitherto, and without reference to the employees concerned, management designated shift work methods. As counterpoint to this, the union arranged a secret ballot for mine tradesmen to decide shiftwork at the mine. Management refused the miners' decisions and the men refused a Company proposal for directors, representative employees and union officials to meet in Sydney, with all transport and accommodation costs at the Company's expense. The men demanded the meeting be held at Mount Morgan. This did not eventuate and the mine 'ceased operations temporarily', an action influenced by the existing widespread railway strike. Despite the mine stoppage, the apprentices went to work the following day, as according to an apprenticeship regulation, they were not involved in strike action. The fact that their tradesmen instructors and supervisors were on strike suggests that for apprentices to present themselves at work was pointless.

A thousand stalwart miners marched,
The red flag freely fluttered,
The gallant leaders (?) [sic] urged them on
With chosen words they uttered.
None dare divert them from their course,
'they'd find a road or make it'.
They made a road, it led to want,
And they're compelled to take it.¹⁰⁶

The town was dismayed to learn in January 1925 that a maximum of 350 men would comprise the mine labour force for years to come, compared to 1 500 men

¹⁰⁵ Fred Cole, 8 October 1992, MMOH.

¹⁰⁶ *Critic*, 16 January 1925.

employed prior to the shut-down. More than 700 men had been on the basic wage and the others, mostly miners, earned an average of 32s 6d. per shift. The Company closed the Baralaba coal mine, a staggering blow to those employees who had built in the area. Similarly, the quarry at Marmor and all outside work for the Company ceased.

Speculation surrounded the cause of the fire at the idle mine in 1925, as accusations of arson conflicted with suggestions of an explosion from lack of ventilation because the fires were drawn. However, such disaster brought unity by necessity:

The fire broke the strike. They couldn't get back quick enough to put the fire out. We'd look down the open cut and could see the fumes coming out...even afterwards, when they covered it with water, if they uncovered it, it could break out again, which it did. They kept an eye on it then, tried to get around it and work it out. There was some underground work going on even in those years. Twenty-five men had to be kept on at the mine and I was one of them.¹⁰⁷

In the event, mateship, unionism, or town influence did not prompt the unity of the men. The rush to save the mine was in the name of economic survival of individual miners and their families. Press reports declared that unionists demanded 'Let it burn', but neither the percentage who declared this nor their place in the union schema is known. At the same time, however, unions demanded that unionists who were to fight the fire until it was out should be paid £2 for an 8 hour shift, including Sundays and holidays, and thereafter, £1 per shift.¹⁰⁸

In the absence of an official inquiry or charges laid, the circumstances of the fire remained unresolved. After the strike, 15 of the 26 remaining members of the Amalgamated Engineers' Union at Mount Morgan were not eligible for benefits, having defaulted on union fees until contacted and counselled by Lyle. In 1926, members demanded representative action to cancel the Company's 1921 award, and inclusion of

¹⁰⁷ Stock, 29 August 1989, OH.

¹⁰⁸ MB, 14 April 1927.

the union in the Mechanical Engineering Award.¹⁰⁹ At this time also, Lyle's emotive report on the plight of Mount Morgan mine families was an entreaty to each of the several thousand Queensland members for 6d. per month to 'place bread in the mouths of many a half-nourished child'.¹¹⁰

Whatever the state of their finances, 'mates' of different shifts or departments at the Works held the traditional farewells at hotels for foremen and shift bosses leaving town.¹¹¹ This suggests that tradesmen and those who had some authority had the chance of work elsewhere. Many others could not afford to leave. Director-shareholders Kelso King and H.G. Niall who were also the liquidators closed the Company on 13 December 1927, when all operations ceased and mine employees were paid off. Those remaining included senior management, watchmen, and the staff at the co-operative store where stock was to be sold off before the store closed down.

This chapter has argued that mateship was evident in everyday shifts, underground or at the Works, and that when disaster struck, men dashed to the mine to rescue the victims, whether known or unknown to the rescuers. However, mateship was tempered by the challenge for daily work. Despite an awareness that solidarity brought bargaining power, the nexus of unionism and industrial conflict that became the driving force of a mining ethos set some against others in the name of work and wages. Miners 'hip-pocket' solidarity prevailed above all else:

There was a more friendly attitude in the town in the old days...a good feeling between the men, although you'll always find people who don't worry about their mates...and some people who can't get their own way condemn the boss for the situation.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ MMGMC, Applications by unions to cancel the MMGMC Employees Award, Industrial relations papers, 1926, M14/1394A.2-3, CC/CQU.

¹¹⁰ *AEU Report*, March 1926, p. 13.

¹¹¹ *Critic*, 3 December 1927.

¹¹² Stock interview, 29 August 1989, OH, CC/CQU.

Ultimately, with the ethic of trust between miners in the workplace subsumed in the need for economic survival, a chill of cynicism penetrated quintessential mateship.