

1-21-1996

Interview no. 905

Kelly Spilsbury

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Kelly Spilsbury by W Noel McAnulty, Jr., 1996, "Interview no. 905," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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Mining in Mexico
Oral History Project

Kelly Spilsbury
By W. Noel McAnulty, Jr.

January 21, 1996

- M: We are in El Paso at the home of Kelly Spilsbury. We're going to visit a little bit about his recollections of his experience in mining in Mexico. Mr. Spilsbury, could you just tell me, briefly, something about your early experience and how you started working in Mexico?
- S: Right, sure. I was born and raised in Mexico without any ambition whatsoever of mining, but later on after working a few years in Arizona in the mines I found that having a little bit of experience in mining and knowing a little bit about Spanish I was... . Well, they wanted me down there, so I was hired. And I worked down there for a good many years. We're talking about years long before your birth.
- M: Where were you born in Mexico?
- S: Actually, I wasn't born in Mexico. I was born in New Mexico about fifty yards from the border, but my family moved back down to Mexico then and I was raised down there.
- M: Were you in the ranching business? Were your family ranchers?
- S: Yeah, my father was. And then after that...
- M: So where in Mexico? Were you in northern Chihuahua or Sonora? Where were you?
- S: No, no. In Mexico we were in Chihuahua, of course. But when I began to work for the mines it had been after some experience in Bisbee, Arizona. And then I went down to work

in Cananea, Sonora.

M: So your first job was in Cananea?

S: Yeah.

M: Okay. And how long were you working in Cananea?

S: I worked a year until they started writing me letters from the draft.

M: So what year would you have started working?

S: This was 1941. And then when they started writing me letters about the draft I went up to Arizona to make myself available for the draft.

M: And then were you in the service during the war?

S: Yes, I was...four years.

M: So then after the service is when you went to work?

S: After the service I came back and I went back to Mexico and found myself during very much of nothing. And the GI Bill of Rights came up and said, why don't you go to school? So I did. I went up to Utah and I went to school at Brigham Young University for four years.

M: Were you majoring in engineering or something technical?

S: (chuckles) This is the thing that's funny. No, I majored in English literature and I wanted to teach school. And I got a job as a schoolteacher, but I couldn't stand it so I went back to mining.

M: So then where did you go?

S: I went back to Taxco, Guerrero.

M: For ASARCO?

S: For ASARCO, yes, sir.

M: That would have been when?

S: That would have been 1952, 1952, in Taxco, Guerrero, where two of my children were born and then, well, we went down for six months and we stayed for thirty-five years.

M: After you worked at Taxco then you worked where?

S: From Taxco we went to Santa Bárbara, Chihuahua.

M: And what year was that about?

S: That was 1954.

M: And you worked several years then at Santa Bárbara and later, La Prieta?

S: No, sir. I went to Santa Bárbara and I worked there from 1954 until 1957. And then I was transferred to Santa Eulalia in Chihuahua City, just out of Chihuahua, and I stayed in Chihuahua City from 1957 until 1960. And then I got a job to go back to Santa Bárbara and I stayed there from 1960 until 1975.

M: And you retired in [19]75?

S: Yes, sir.

M: Have you been involved in mining since you left Mexico?

S: Really, I have. Actually, I have. There have been people who have called us and we've gone down to the west coast of Mexico down into Nayarit and Sinaloa and we worked in several mines down there, but they have seen my reputation as a miner and they have thought, "Just get him down here and he can create ore." But I've gone down there and we haven't been able to create ore. We can mine it if we can find it.

M: So then in your time working with ASARCO, primarily, were you involved directly in mining?

S: Altogether.

M: And underground?

S: Altogether, yes, sir.

M: As a...

S: Mine foreman, actually. I started out as a mine shift boss in Taxco and then I was promoted to mine foreman. And from mine foreman in Santa Bárbara I was promoted to mine superintendent and then to assistant superintendent in Santa Eulalia and back to Santa Bárbara later as assistant superintendent. And I never got any farther.

M: Tell me about your first mining experiences you had working in Cananea. What were you doing there?

S: In Cananea, actually, it was a situation of favoritism. I went down there as a shift boss. And the general manager had a daughter who kind of liked me, so I got an awful lot of attention that I wouldn't have gotten ordinarily. The mine there is a different situation. I would never have played with it real well.

M: But now, were you working underground in Cananea?

S: Yeah. This was 1940.

M: Was that before they had the open-pit?

S: Oh, yeah, yeah, it was before they had the open-pit. We were working what they called the porphyry division. And everything, I don't know...my experience in mining had been so meek that, actually, I didn't really know what I was doing down there, but I got this job as a mine shift boss because of favoritism. But I never really knew what was going on, actually. They gave me a job. They said, "Look, this is the most important thing in Cananea. We've got to drive these

drifts." We were driving the drifts. It was eight meters wide and twelve meters high. They wanted everything to go perfectly.

M: So you were driving a drift?

S: Just driving a drift. That's the job I had.

M: What was the name of the operating company in Cananea at that time?

S: That was the Cananea Consolidated Copper Company, ANACONDA.

M: Okay.

S: (clears throat) I'm sorry I'm not able to talk.

M: So then after you left Cananea and, then, after the war years, you went back to work in Taxco?

S: Right.

M: Now what were the conditions like in Taxco in those years?

S: In Taxco they were excellent, excellent. We went down there for, like I said, for six months, my wife and I... (taping stopped and started again)

M: Okay, you were telling about what conditions were like at Taxco when you first went down to work there.

S: Yeah, our company had just bought in there. They had bought in from Howe Sound, a company called Howe Sound who was having a little bit of difficulty. And our company bought in there. And the mines, actually, they consisted of nothing more than the shrinkage stopes. And the job that I had was the upper levels of oxides...very, very high grade silver and lead. And the only time I ever did anything beside shrinkage stopes was an example of top slice that we tried there. The grade was so high we had sometimes a streak of galena thirty-seven meters

wide, you know, that would run sixty, seventy percent lead, so it was worthwhile to try this top slicing then. But, otherwise than that, it was all shrinkage stoping and the situation was, well, a matter of getting along with the people.

M: Tell me about the miners that you had. Now, you were working at Taxco as a mine foreman or a shift boss?

S: Right, mine shift boss.

M: What was the makeup of the mining crew? Were they mostly Mexican nationals?

S: No, no. The workers were, sure, but everybody there...the general superintendent, of course, himself, was an American, his assistant was an American, the mine superintendent was an American, and the mine foreman was an American.

M: And then the Mexican nationals were miners?

S: The Mexican nationals had the job of sotamineros, bosses.

M: For example, how many miners, approximately, were working underground at that time?

S: In Taxco we had a hundred and fifty men. That is, I did, but there were two other mines.

M: And how would you assess the quality of the miners? Were they good workers, well-trained? What sort of problems did you have in working with them?

S: Well, that's a good question because most of our miners were...we just got the men from around locally, but there had been an old Mexican mining company that had gone under over in the state of Veracruz, and these miners all came over to work for us. And they were good miners. We had some good miners.

When they came over to work at Taxco we had some very excellent miners.

M: Now, describe what the conditions would have been like underground at Taxco. First of all, was it a shaft mine?

S: Well, they had a shaft there, but we had three levels that went into the mountain. I worked on the seventy-five level, which was the main level, you know, and there was a mine below us. There was an operation below us, but that shaft was over beyond the mountain, you know. And most of the operation was just some shafts that went into the mountain, caught the vein, and then they mined. We mined right up to the surface, actually.

M: So most of the ore, then, was just passed down to the haulage level?

S: Right. It was the cheapest mining you can imagine, you know, just going in and the ore body was above you, so we just mined it and...

M: Describe kind of a typical day for you working underground.

S: Okay. Actually, it was pretty stark. My wife would get up at 5:30 a.m. in the morning and I'd try to be at the mine by 6:20 a.m. to lay out my people and explain to them what they had to do. We had to drill, we had to blast. It wasn't like...I mean, we had the shrinkage stope system, you know. We could drill and blast and we had a pad. We didn't have to pull our ore the day we blasted it. I mean, the mill could wait a couple of days, but the mill, actually, was hungry most of the time.

M: Then was the tramming done by...

S: We had little mancha motors, little mancha motors..

M: And then what time did the shift end?

S: We went in at seven o'clock in the morning and we were off at 3:00 p.m.

M: When you were working down there were there still a lot of the old Spanish workings around or recognizable? Taxco was worked for ever and ever.

S: Yeah, they had talked about them but, actually, what we did was ASARCO bought into Howe Sound was in there and Howe Sound wanted to get out, so ASARCO bought them out and from there we started from the bottom. They had a sulfide mill and ASARCO put in an oxide mill because the upper levels were very, very high grade in oxide.

M: Was that cyanide for the oxide?

S: No, no. It was all flotation.

M: Did they have a colonia, a mining camp?

S: No, not in Taxco. The company was, well, I'm not going to say they were generous, but they would let us rent a house in the city and they would pay a certain amount of money. We had to pay more than the company would pay to get our house.

M: But the mines were very close to the town?

S: Actually, they were not. Actually, it was quite a way out to the mine...about three miles from Taxco out to our mine.

M: Well, that strikes me as a bit of a curious situation because in other places you see, like La Prieta, where the mine was right in town, and yet they had a colony there. Why didn't Taxco have one?

S: Well, it sure did. Our company was fairly new. When I went

down there they told me, "We don't even know what we have here." There was an ore body right in Taxco, but it was a mine that had already been kind of exploited and had kind of petered out. And all of the mines were about seven miles away and, like I said, no colony. They said, "Well, we'll just have to find out where we can live." No, in La Prieta they had a beautiful colony and, also, Santa Bárbara, too.

M: You mentioned that one of the principle assets you had, or at least in your opinion, of working in Mexico was your knowledge of Spanish.

S: Yeah.

M: Were the other Americans that were working in Taxco at that time, were they bilingual?

S: Well, they got to be, but we had some real problems down there when the engineers from Canada would come down with only a knowledge of the operation with absolutely no knowledge of Spanish, but they got along. Engineers have a habit of doing whatever they have to, you know, but they did have a problem with language.

M: So then, later, you worked at Santa Bárbara?

S: Yes, sir.

M: Now, was Santa Bárbara a bigger operation than Taxco?

S: Oh, yeah, the biggest operation in the world. Santa Bárbara is the biggest underground lead and zinc mine in the world and, I believe, it still is. And this is 1996.

M: It may well be, I don't know. San Martín may be mining more.

S: I think it is the biggest underground operation in the world.

M: So about how many miners were working at Santa Bárbara?

- S: When I was in Santa Bárbara as a mining superintendent there were over seven hundred men in the mines. I had seven mines and, of course, some of them were smaller, but I had seven hundred miners to keep up with.
- M: So what were the principle differences between working at Taxco and working at Santa Bárbara other than just the size?
- S: Santa Bárbara is an old mining camp and all the miners were excellent miners. Their grandfathers had started there. The miners knew exactly what to do and they had a powerful union. We knew exactly what we could say to them, what we couldn't say to them, but Santa Bárbara was a lovely place to work in.
- M: Now you mentioned that, your statement about what you could say to the miners, for example. Was that a problem or was it just something you contended with everyday?
- S: Well, it certainly was a problem if you offended one of them. You could certainly be in hot water in a minute.
- M: With the union?
- S: With the union, right.
- S: I had very, very good friends there, grandfathers, fathers, and sons, but I could damn well get in hot water in a minute if I said the wrong thing.
- M: What was the makeup of the technical staff at Santa Bárbara? Were they all foreigners there, too?
- S: No, no, they were not. The general manager was an American, the assistant superintendent was an American, the mine superintendent was an American, the chief clerk was an American, and the man in the warehouse was an American, the head mechanic, the electrician was, also, an American. We're

talking about when I first went there. All this disintegrated and Mexicans took their place.

M: But that was after the Mexicanization law.

S: Actually, it was before.

M: Okay.

S: Actually, it was before because they saw this coming a long time ago. A lot of our engineers saw this coming and they left.

M: So the Mexican nationals, then, that came on as engineers, were they well-trained?

S: Very, very well-trained.

M: Were those graduates mostly of the Mexican institutions or were they graduates of...

S: A lot of them were graduates from out here at UTEP, what they called the El Paso Mines, but Guanajuato produced some very, very good Mexican engineers, too...University of Guanajuato.

M: Were the engineers that were working, then, with ASARCO before the Mexicanization, were the situations such that they could advance fairly well within the administration?

S: Yeah, yeah. They did, they did. They came in with a title more than anything else, you know, and demanding right off benefits from the title, but they learned that they had to get their hands dirty first. But some wonderful, great, great people...wonderful engineers and smart guys. They had to learn, first, that they had to work.

M: Now did some of these engineers out of school, were they working underground with you?

S: Yeah, they sure were.

M: (chuckles) Learning how to mine?

S: They were learning how to mine. They actually had come out of the university with their title and then they... . Well, they did a good job. I mean, they were awfully good miners.

M: What were the living conditions like at Santa Bárbara?

S: In Santa Bárbara we had a colony, like you were talking about a little while ago, an American colony, and had an excellent situation there. Each one of us had our home and our telephone and everything was paid for by the company and we were protected. No one could come in. The guard had to, you know, let them in. We had a wonderful experience there.

M: Now were the Mexican engineers that were there...say, these would have been the mid-[19]50s we're talking about, right?

S: Yes.

M: Were they living in the colony?

S: Well, some of them were. The better ones, let's put it that way.

M: Was it determined more by the job position they had?

S: Actually, it was. Actually, it was. The safety engineer lived in there. Actually, our safety engineer was one of the greatest engineers who ever lived in Mexico. He wrote the mining safety law for Mexico.

M: Do you remember his name?

S: Yes, I do, Jorge Rangel, and he lived in the colony. And he was one of these Mexicans who liked to kind of laugh at himself, but he was a brilliant, brilliant engineer.

M: Now, correct me if I'm wrong on this, Kelly, but as I

remember, the mining law required that the safety engineer was a Mexican national. Is that true?

S: Pardon?

M: That whoever was functioning as a safety engineer for these companies had to be a Mexican national?

S: At the time I was there it did, yeah.

M: I think that was the law.

S: Yeah, right.

M: Were there any particular problems with the safety engineer? He must have had to interface with a lot of different people, not only the miners, but the administrators and everyone.

S: I never heard of that. In fact, Rangel was always raising hell with the people a whole lot more than we were.

M: With the miners?

S: Yeah.

M: And really enforcing safety?

S: Enforcing safety laws, yeah.

M: Safety and health?

S: Right. Rangel was a, well, he was just a grand guy and he sure was a smart engineer. When he first started out he came in there to Santa Bárbara and they gave him a job as safety engineer. What he wanted to do was to get in to production. And, oh, about two years later, I said, "Why don't you get in to production?" He was kind of funny. He said, "If I do, first thing I'll do is have to go into a mine under a blockhead like you." Because I was mine foreman at that time.

M: In your opinion, particularly kind of looking back on it now, were the mining conditions particularly unsafe?

S: Actually, no, because our company was very, very...safety was one of the most important things in our job and, I mean, they had the highest rate of anything we could think of as safety. ASARCO did not like to have to report an accident. I mean, I've seen our general managers say, "We regret to report a fatal accident.. ." ASARCO was always very, very careful about that.

M: So then later you worked at Santa Eulalia?

S: Yes, sir.

M: Now, again, that's one of the real famous districts in Mexico.

S: Oh, that was nice. I went up there after this mine flood, you know. You heard about the flood?

M: That was in 1945, wasn't it?

S: Yes, sir. And most of that flood had happened on the lower levels, of course. And the operation that we had, we had to worry about it. I mean, we had to worry about it constantly. If we drove a drift we had to drill a hole, plus six above us, minus six below us, and six degrees on either side.

M: As pilot holes?

S: Yeah, fifty yards ahead of any round that we drove in order to make sure we weren't going to run into that flood again. I was not there at the time of the flood.

M: Well, what were the mining conditions like at Santa Eulalia? The ore bodies at Santa Eulalia were a quite a bit more irregular in form.

S: Some were. Santa Eulalia, I'll always think, we were allowed to operate because we were hiring people...subsidy, subsidy, you know. It was a great ore body of... . It was one of

these room and pillar things, you know. The ore would just appear wherever it was. And then we had this country rock that ran a little bit of silver, about sixty-five, even to a hundred, grams of silver. In the garnet rock, that's what I'm trying to say. And as a mine foreman I didn't hesitate to grab the garnet rock too, to keep my boss happy, but the Santa Eulalia was nothing more or less than just a subsidy. The mill, the mill was in Avalos was, you know, and Avalos would be glad to have anything they could get, so we tried to get them something from down there.

M: Now, when you say a subsidy this would have been in the late [19]50s, when...

S: In [19]57 I went to Santa Eulalia.

M: Right. And these were basically government tax breaks more than anything else. Is that correct?

S: Right, right.

M: Based on production and you had to meet certain requirements in regard to spending exploration dollars and all those things.

S: I don't recall that the government ever expected anything from us, but we expected a lot from the government. But, actually, I wasn't the manager there, so I'm not too familiar with that.

M: But you were aware of the problems?

S: I knew something about it, right.

M: So, really, I think, would it be fair to say that by the late [19]50s that the economic conditions for the mining companies had gotten pretty difficult?

S: It sure had, it sure had. The company right next to ASARCO in

Santa Eulalia was called the Potosí Mining Company. Now, I'm not sure about this, but one of the men in Potosí, Mariano Valenzuela, he had been a very powerful man in the union and he got some money. And I believe, I've always heard, that his partner was Adolfo López Mateos, who was the president of Mexico. But, anyway, our company loaned them money because we had to have their ore for our smelter. And when that mine burned I was down there myself almost twenty days in that mine trying to put that fire out and get our people out. Well, our people were not exposed, but they lost some people. They lost nine men. But it took me twenty days to recover the mines where our people could work and it was because our company loaned the money to Mariano Valenzuela so he could buy the mine and produce the ore for our smelter. That was Santa Eulalia.

M: But, now, at Santa Eulalia, were you working primarily in the east camp or the west camp?

S: East camp. No, I was in San Antonio, but I was in charge of both. I was mine superintendent.

M: And, again, at Santa Eulalia, there was a colony there maintained by the company?

S: It was a lovely colony there, a lovely colony there.

M: Were most of the colonies really basically the same? I mean, they provided the same sort of facilities.

S: About the same thing. We had a kind of a Hillary Clinton complex of First Lady and all that stuff.

M: Now why would you say that? Was that just kind of the pecking order? The wife of the person in charge kind of...

S: The wife, yeah, but the general managers were always great guys. But you can't take away from their wives. Their wives were just a little bit, I don't know, kind of Hillarys.

M: Had their own society, probably.

S: Yeah.

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

M: So after you left Santa Eulalia you returned to Santa Bárbara?

S: To Santa Bárbara, yeah.

M: And that would have been in 1960?

S: Right.

M: In 1960, okay. Now, then, the Mexicanization for ASARCO took place shortly after 1960?

S: Shortly after that, right.

M: And what were you aware of, kind of on an operating level, of the principle changes after Mexicanization?

S: The first thing, naturally, we worried about what the situation as far as our job was concerned, but our management in Mexico City told us that, "Your job is secure. Just stay here. They want you to stay. We're going to Mexicanize. The law was that we had to be fifty-one percent Mexican. And we have our forty-nine percent, so they want us to stay. And ASARCO and New York, the Guggenheims, want you to stay." So we decided to stay and they were very, very nice to us for a long time.

M: They being...

S: The Mexicans.

M: Okay.

S: Their Mexican engineers could have taken over from the same day. They didn't lack experience, they didn't lack ability. They could have taken over, but the government just gave them more time than they needed, you know.

M: A phase-in period as much as anything else.

S: Yeah. Until about 1973 there was a man named Jorge Larea who came in. And Larea was, also, one of the principle people who demanded from José Luis Echeverria, "Let's just grab this thing." So they did. Echeverria was the president of Mexico and his friend was Larea amongst others. And they were the guys who really cashed in.

M: So then the principle change with ASARCO came after Larea really became more directly involved in the administration of the company?

S: Larea was one of these real suave people who convinced our general manger, Mr. Walter Nock, that he was the guy to take over. And the minute he took over, then he kind of pushed Walter Nock to one side. Then after that none of our jobs were secure.

M: Now, one of the things I don't really understand, Kelly, is that after the Mexicanization a lot of the foreigners eventually left. They all eventually left, but it was a gradual exodus. Some people that, apparently, were close to retirement stayed on and then retired and others just left to take better jobs or different jobs somewhere else. What was the kind of the club that the Mexican government used to get

to foreigners? Did it become more and more difficult, for example, for you to get papers to stay in Mexico?

S: No, I had my papers before I ever went down there. They never questioned citizenship or the right to live, but after Larea, Jorge Larea, came in it became very, very obvious that... . He used to tell our general manager- I mean, people don't talk to Chuck Campbell like that- "We're still moving planes to the United States every day if you want to go." I mean, Larea, he wanted to take over. He's not a Mexican, even. He's a Basque, a Spaniard.

M: I didn't know that.

S: He's a Spaniard. And, I think, he lived in Washington at one time as a child, but he learned to hate Americans, so when he got down there in Mexico with a lot of money and he had a chance to get a certain amount of revenge... .

But, actually, when I left in 1975 I didn't stay because I wanted to. I stayed because I bought a little ranch just out of Santa Bárbara and I thought I could make it, you know, kind of a nest egg, but when they kept putting pressure on me...they were going to send me to Zacatecas to some little camp they had down there. I thought, "Well, I'd better sell and go." So I did.

M: Now, was there a difference in attitude of the working people? You worked with the Mexican national miners everyday. Did you notice a difference in attitude working with them before the Mexicanization and after the Mexicanization?

S: Not so much, not so much. I learned in the Philippine Islands during the war that whoever is winning is going to be on the

friendly side. We went into a little village one night. We fought our way across the river against a bunch of Japs and the Filipinos all embraced us. We were a company. And that night a battalion of Japs came in and pushed us across the river back and, I remember, these same Filipinos that were kissing us were throwing rocks at us and so I thought, "Well, whoever's in charge seems to be... ."

M: Be the one that everyone likes.

S: Yeah, who ever is winning seems to be the one. But the Mexican miners, they told us, they told my wife, "If Kelly goes, the whole damn company is going to fold." It didn't fold, I mean... .

M: Were there changes in living conditions at the colony after the Mexicanization?

S: Actually, I think there was. I think there was. You know, when Echeverria, who strangely enough, is the guy who destroyed Mexico, he came up to Santa Bárbara when he was still a candidate. And I went up. We all did. We went up to hear his speech and there were a thousand Mexicans who had placards: "WE WANT WATER!" WE WANT WATER" WE WANT WATER!" And he gave a diatribe of, I don't know, but finally he said, "I see that you are all demanding water." And he said, "That's fine, that's fine, so we're going to get water." He said, "First we have to find it. We have to produce it and then we have to distribute it." Well, that's the last we ever heard of water and it's still going on. The situation is still the same. (chuckles) But all those people, there must have been a thousand of us, we all clapped like... . (claps

hands) We thought that was the most wonderful thing we'd ever heard of.

M: In the years of your experience of mining in Mexico, what would you say were the principle technical changes that you saw during that period?

S: Well, there was tremendous technical change. In Santa Bárbara, the greatest, like I said a while ago, the biggest underground lead and zinc mine in the world, all we did was shrinkage stoping. And when these Mexicans came in with their far-flung ideas of bringing in new equipment, you know, our shrinkage stoping was completely thrown out. They brought in a new system that completely wiped that out, and we never knew exactly what to do, you know. They just destroyed us. They came in thinking, "All we have to do is get the width of the vein, the depth of the vein, and then what we'll do is take these long drills and we'll drill twenty-five, thirty-five meter holes and forget about this. That way we can produce the tonnage we want. We can tell you next month what production we're going to have this month. By that time we will have fifty, sixty, thirty-five foot holes. We can blast five holes at a time." It turned out to be a fiasco.

M: This would have been big, open stopes?

S: Yeah, yeah. And what happened, really bad...I'll tell you something else about Santa Bárbara. Santa Bárbara is unique. They have what they called a carguero system. Cargueros are people who work...actually, they're pretty important people. Some of the most important people in Santa Bárbara belong to that, that is, the owners. They were allowed to come in on

the upper levels of our company and mine what the company had left. Could I have just a minute, please? (Taping stopped and started again)

M: We were talking about the cargueros, the carguero system, at Santa Bárbara.

S: Okay. They were allowed to mine the remnants of veins on the upper levels of the company. And when this new system came in they were critical of the way we had always mined and so they demanded that they would come out and dig into the walls a little bit more. And, actually, what they found were stringers of ore, a little bit to the sides of the vein, stringers that we had never considered. Actually, they were marginal. It wasn't ore, it wasn't, but they mined these. And so we would have a vein ten meters wide and they decided to mine eight meters in depth, you know. So you got eight meters wide and you got ten meters depth. You've got a real problem. You have to have exactly the same width as you have depth in a mine. And the first thing you know they had cave-ins, they had people falling, and they had... . But, I mean, this is a new system that came in when the Mexicans took over. I mean, they're brilliant guys. I'm not critical of them, but they were trying to make a system of mining where that system didn't exist. And they finally had to come back to shrinkage stoping like we've done for centuries, I guess. The first mining that was done in Santa Bárbara, I understand, was in 1500. The Spaniards had found it and started work and then Cortes came over with his conquistadors. And most of his conquistadors were from Extremadura, right along the side of

Portugal, you know, where the Spanish mines are. And the Spanish miners are considered to be the best miners in the world.

M: Well, they certainly had some great success. When you were living in places like Santa Bárbara, and even in Chihuahua, were you still maintaining a personal interest in ranching?

S: No, no. After I left Santa Bárbara... . Actually, I bought this ranch in Santa Bárbara because I almost had to. The chief clerk there, he had a lot of money and, strangely enough, I never knew where he got it, but he had a hell of a lot of money. So when I got there he had this little ranch and he had tremendous amount of support from the company and had some Santa Gertrudis cattle there, the first we'd ever seen in that area. And when he left he wanted me to take it over and I said, "I can't do it. My job is too big." So he got another guy to take it and this other guy eventually left when he was fired. And so he came back from El Paso and said, "Kelly, you've got to take it." [I said], "Okay, fine, so if I have to work so damn hard I might as well buy it." And I bought it, but it never was anything that would make any money. In ranching if you own less than 250 head of cattle you've got to just work for them, not for yourself.

M: You had mentioned some of the technical changes that went on in the mining during that period. Were there, also, some changes in safety and health requirements?

S: Really, no. The only thing that I ever knew of...no, no. ASARCO, when I went there...as American Smelting and Refining Company they were far more advanced in safety than anyone I

ever knew of. And when the Mexican people came in, like I said, Jorge Rangel wrote the mining law for them. And he wrote what he learned from ASARCO.

M: Is there some particular experience or adventure, or something of that nature, that sticks in your mind of your experience of working in the mines for many years?

S: Oh, I had so many experiences I don't know quite what to say. We had a shrinkage stope that was dangerous to work in. And my bosses said, "We got to go. It's just too damn good to leave. We've got to get this ore out." So I went in every morning and I told my guys, I said, "You're in a dangerous spot here. And the only thing I can tell you is, 'Be careful.' If you hear a sign of "loose" coming down, if you hear a sign of ceiling coming in, get out. That's all I say." Okay, well, we had an accident and some loose came down and two people were hurt very, very badly. And then, of course, the union demanded that I was to blame. And in the investigation I had to tell them, "Look, I'm a professional miner and the only way that I can know about a place that's too dangerous to work in is if I would work in it myself. And I've worked in those places and I believe that I was responsible enough that I could work there and get by." Well, the company raised hell and said that I had "...sold them out. You should have really nailed them." And, you know, you have to go along with what was factual more than what the company wanted. The company wanted me to say that it wasn't dangerous at all. Actually, we had one man practically dead and another, so we had a lot of that to cope with.

M: You mentioned things like the fire at Potosí mine. Were there other similar incidences in any other mine?

S: Oh, that was terrible. That was terrible. You know, mine fires are the worse things that you can think of. We weren't expecting that. It wasn't our mine at all. And always in mining they tell you that you have to be near where there's an exit of air. You have to be near where there's an exit of air or, if you can be, where air comes down. And we were so fortunate. Three of our mines were our main important mines near Potosí. All of them the air went down, so what the hell. We didn't worry. And I was at home one evening when, all of sudden, this claxion came on and they were screaming for help. I went down, too, but it was a terrible situation. When I got there the hoist man had already passed out, smoke from up the shaft had come in and invaded the shaft, and he was passed out and...paralyzed everything, you know. The cage was hung between...right at a level, you know. And so from then on we had to just worry what we could do about it. We didn't move the cage until the next day and we found three men dead in the cage. And the hoist man could have just brought them out and they would have been saved, but the poor devil. That smoke came out so thick and he was engulfed in it and lost consciousness. And then it took us about three weeks to get our mine cleared because smoke and gas invaded our mines, too.

M: Let me change the subject a bit. You mentioned earlier that your children were born in Taxco. Did they grow up in Mexico in the mining camps?

S: They sure did. They sure did. My kids were both high school

age. My older three children, they went to the eighth grade and then we sent them across the line to high school.

M: Did they come to high school here in El Paso?

S: Actually, two of them went to a private school in Casas Grande, Chihuahua, a church school, and the other one, we sent him to Florida to a military school.

M: How would you assess the quality of the schools? Now, they would have attended, at least primary school, in the mining camps. Is that correct?

S: Well, sir, I've got to be very, very complementary to the schools because my wife always managed them (chuckles) over there, especially in Santa Bárbara. She didn't in Santa Eulalia, but she did in Santa Bárbara up to the eighth grade. And I'll tell you something else. Some of the kids that she taught have really been successful.

M: You've kind of been a little bit, I guess removed, certainly, from direct involvement in Mexican mining for some time, but what's your opinion about the future for Mexican mining?

S: Oh, I think, that has to be about thirty percent of their income and there's a...oh, hell, you can't imagine the store house, the ore that they have available, you know. Mexican mining is actually the future of the country, the future of the country, and they have great people to do it, too. I wish they'd turn it over to the engineers and not to the lawyers and the politicians because the engineers are better, just as good as anyone, you know.

M: Kelly, thanks very much for your time. I appreciate your comments.

- S: Well, I hope I've given you something that is helpful.
- M: You have, indeed. Thank you. (taping stopped and started again) One other question, Kelly, about Mexicanization. What would be your general assessment of Mexicanization, particularly in regard to the mining industry? Was it something that was good or bad for Mexico?
- S: I think it was a terrible thing. It was a terrible thing, not only because it disturbed investors who wanted to get down in that country, but because they lost confidence in the government. And, I think, that Mexicanization, the same thing has always...right now, you can prove that it's all bad. They're wanting us to go back. They're inviting everybody to come back. And at that time it seemed like a tragedy. And even now it seems like even more so. That's my opinion of the Mexicanization.

End of Interview