CAPTAIN'S FLAT

Boom to Bust — And Back Again
From 1883...

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2nd Edition

Chapter 8
Miners at Work

Efficiency expert: "Mr. Jones, what do you do in this mine?"
Mr. Jones: "Nothing."
Efficiency expert: "And you, Mr. Martin, what do you do here?"
Mr. Martin: "Nothing."
Efficiency expert: "Hmm. Duplication."

A Bit Of Fun

In spite of the rigour their job demanded, miners found time for a chuckle or two — especially with the novices. If the trip in the traffic cage didn't startle the inexperienced, the jobs they were given never failed to. Imagine their surprise when a gruff-looking miner told them to get some hay for the *grizzly* they'd be working on. The baffled newcomers eventually found out that a *grizzly* was not a bear, but a large grid over an ore chute. The criss-crossed rails stopped large chunks of ore from blocking the passages. The men who worked on the *grizzlies* were clean-up crews. They wore safety ropes while they broke the ore into pieces small enough to fall through the grid.

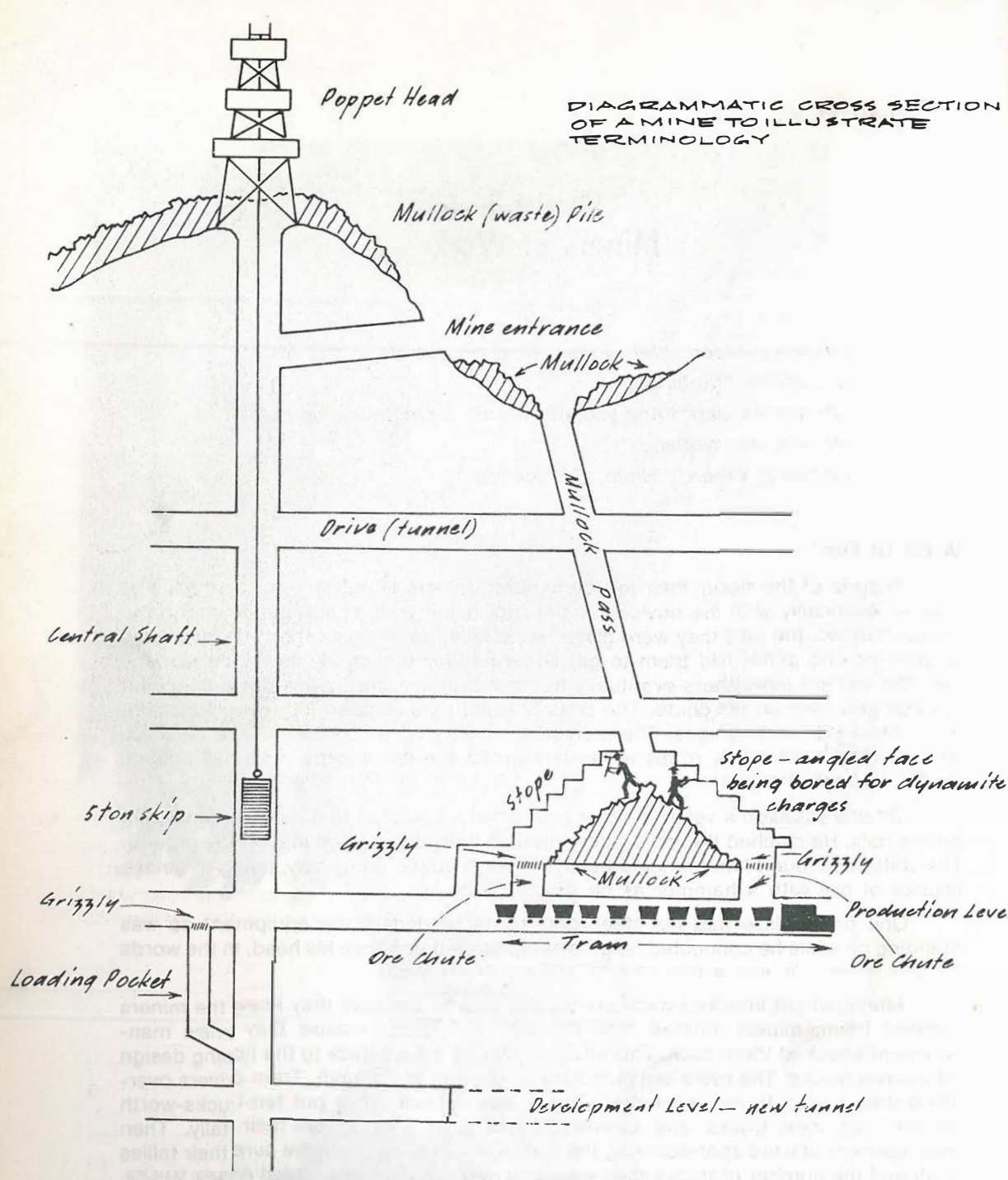
On one occasion a veteran miner convinced a new man that he was not to walk on the rails. He cinched the lad's safety rope so tight that it lifted him off the ground. The shift boss found him swinging back and forth above the *grizzly,* trying to smash chunks of ore with a hammer as he flew past them.

One poor fellow had his steel-toed boots welded to the equipment he was standing on while he connected lengths of pipe together above his head. In the words of one miner, "It was a real rogues' gallery down there."

Management knocked back production figures because they knew the miners inflated them; miners inflated their production figures because they knew management knocked them back. This impasse can be traced back to the tipping design of the ore trucks. The more ore in the truck, the easier it tipped. Tram drivers overfilled their trucks to make emptying them less difficult. They put ten-trucks-worth of ore into nine trucks and claimed the original amount on their tally. Then management started spot-counting the trucks in the drive. To make sure their tallies matched the number of trucks they were carrying, tram drivers added empty trucks, or *windies,* to the train.

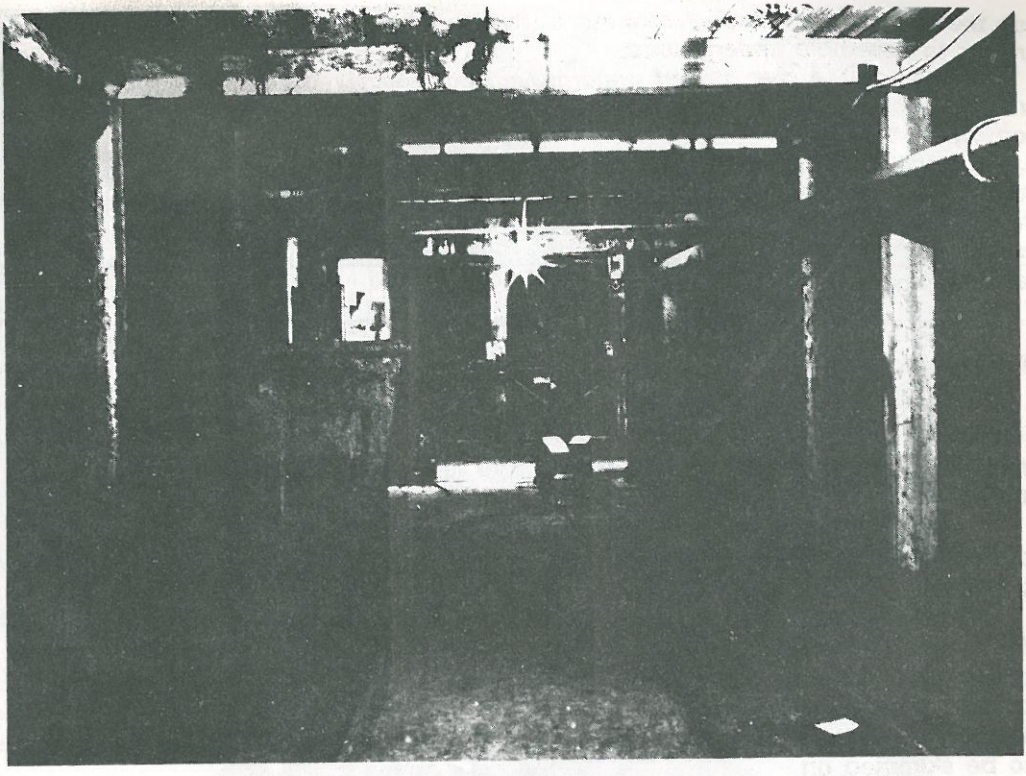
When production figures got too out of line management brought tram drivers in and told them to stop trucking *windies.* To this the drivers replied, "We don't truck *windies,* boss — they're too hard to tip."

One driver's claim was so over-inflated that his boss said, "Listen mate, if there's as much ore in that loading pocket as you claim there is, it would stand 50 feet above the poppet head by now."



At the developmental level new *drives* (tunnels) are blasted out of the rock. Boggers (mechanical diggers) clear the waste away after each firing. The waste (*mullock*) is taken to the surface in the *skip*.

Miners bore holes in *stopes* for dynamite charges. With each blast the drill sites get farther out of reach. Mullock is dumped down the *mullock pass* to raise the floor level. Timbermen put down boards for the miners to stand on. After the stope has been blasted, scrapers scoop the ore to the ore chutes where *tram trucks* are waiting to carry it to *loading pockets*. From there the ore is taken to the surface in the skip.



A solitary ore truck in a deserted tunnel.
Photograph courtesy S. STANTON, Captain's Flat, N.S.W.

A Day in the Mine

Underground jobs included: drilling, machine operation (trams, scrapers, boggers etc.), scouting (clean-up), plate-laying and timberwork. To get every man to the level he worked on at 8 o'clock in the morning a skipman (lift operator) signalled the winder with a key. Five taps then four (5x4) signalled a drop to the number 20 level; three taps then two (3x2) meant the sixth level, and so on.

Areas with mining in progress were called production levels; on developmental levels miners prepared new tunnels. The men had to clear every level of the rubble left from the previous shift's firing before they could start drilling operations of their own.

On the production level a scoop and dragline scraped out the work area (stope) and tram drivers trucked the ore to a loading pocket. A five-ton skip hoisted the ore to the surface. While this was going on, miners bored holes for the next firing. They were not supposed to drill within two inches of exposed butts (drill-holes left from the previous firing) as they might still contain dynamite. Since it is easier to sink a hole once a start has been made, miners sometimes took that chance. Those who miscalculated never lived to tell about it

On the development level, a mechanical digger (bogger) scooped out the waste exposing the wall for drilling. To make an 8'x8' tunnel the miners drilled four back holes, four shoulder holes, four knee holes, and four lifters (floor level). In the middle of the inside shoulder holes and inside knee holes they drilled angle cuts to be fired first. The explosives were timed to fire from the inside out. While the drilling progressed, plate-layers laid permanent tracks for the trams to carry mullock (waste) out of the drive. Workers connected air pipes and electricity while timbermen shored

up the walls of the tunnel. A saw mill at the mine head pre-cut the timber so it was ready to assemble underground.

At lunch the men stayed underground on their level. Each drive had a "crib room" with a table, benches, and electric urn. Men cooked hot meals in steamers on top of the urns.

Firing took place at the end of the shift. At approximately 3:20 the workers on the lowest level piled into the traffic cage and the shift boss fired the charges. Each level was cleared and fired in succession from bottom to top. By 4 o'clock the ventilation system had cleaned the air of dust and the afternoon shift could start all over again.

Processing the Ore

Five-ton skips carried the ore to the surface and tipped it into a large ore bin. The ore gravitated into the Jaw Crusher and Simmons Crusher emerging as pebble-sized bits. A conveyor belt carried it to four concrete storage bins. Each silo-like container held 1,000 tons of ore.

The storage bins had vibrators at the bottoms to keep the crushed ore moving out onto conveyor belts. The belts took the ore to gigantic ball-mills which further pulverised the ore to the consistency of fine powder.

The powder passed through classifiers into the treatment cells where an oil flotation process separated the various elements. Developed at Broken Hill, this process became standard mining practice throughout the world. It involved the mixing of chemical re-agents with with the ore in the presence of oil. The re-agents attached themselves to all but one mineral and the unweighted element floated to the surface to be skimmed off.

Lead concentrate was recovered first. When smelted it produced lead, copper, gold and silver. The second stage produced zinc concentrate and the final stage drew iron pyrites for fertilizer and sulphuric acid.

After the minerals had been extracted, launders (gutters) channelled the leftover sludge into slime dams where the heavy tailings sank and the water evaporated. A later method involved dewatering the sludge and dumping it on a waste hill.

Conditions in the Mines

Like scuba divers and astronauts, miners, too, work in an alien environment. Their only protection is the structure of the mine itself — if it fails, they may die.

By 1961 the Captain's Flat hill had been catacombed to the incredible depth of 2,600 feet. The company reports that serious ground movements in levels 16, 20 and 22 (the deepest) became so alarming that all the men were withdrawn from the affected areas. The drives showed considerable stress.

In the Keating's section of the mine an entire shaft collapsed. Luckily it happened overnight and no one was seriously hurt. It was the third collapse to occur in that area. The Lake George Mines Company posted notices in the town warning parents and children about the unsettled ground. The fallen areas are visible on the right-hand side of the road as it leaves Captain's Flat in the direction of Jerangle.

Heavy rain ran into filling passes weakening unstable working places. In parts of the mine, water poured off the walls. Besides these natural "waterfalls", man-made streams poured out of the ore chutes when the work areas were hosed to keep down the dust. Men in gumboots and raincoats splashed under passages collecting fallen ore. Wooden launders (gutters) carried water out of the drives to pumps near the central shaft.

Workmen installing equipment below ground.

Photograph courtesy VAL MORAN, Queanbeyan, N.S.W.

In 1943 a dam holding mine waste collapsed into the water reservoir and polluted it. The reservoir supplied water for boring, for showers in the change house, and also for drinking underground. Miners refused to work until they were assured that the water was safe. They asked a management official to try it and see what he thought. He braved one gulp of the brackish water then raced to the surface and sent a sample to Sydney for testing.

With men's lives depending on the holding capacity of timber using Australian hardwood was dodgy. It shattered without warning. For a time, Lake George Mines used nothing but Oregon pine from Canada. It "talked to you" with creaks and groans before it snapped. Miners had a chance to escape. When the Oregon pine became too expensive, Thompson's Mill near Parker's Gap supplied most of the timber for the mine. Gumm's Mill at Harold's Cross provided some, too, but did not deal exclusively with the mine as Thompson's did.

For every year the mine operated, one man died. Most accidents were serious; many were critical. A rockfall buried one Captain's Flat miner when he walked under a stope. His workmates struggled feverishly but it took them an hour and a half to release him. The miner suffered a fractured skull, severe lacerations, a sliced earlobe and broken leg — he considers himself lucky. He survived.

MINE JARGON
(excerpts)

I'm sitting in the Crib room chewing bread and meat,
A crib room, as I found out, is where miners eat.
I listen to them talking about the things they do,
And sometimes I wonder if it's a lead mine or a zoo.

For there are goosenecks and gympies, skewers and rails,
Midwives and needles, spuds, unions and tails,
Slides and chutes, legs and toms,
Grizzlies, manways, blisters and bombs.

Hanging walls, footwalls, faults and dykes,
Pockets and passes, bugs and spikes,
Monkies and butterflies, and sets of rules,
Boggers and scrapers, kibbles and mules.

Clay cocks and air cocks, blow pipes and line,
These are some of the phrases used in the mine.
I feel like a foreigner each time they speak,
You see I'm a new chum, been down just a week!

"SAPPER"
(Bert Beros)

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Kevin Radburn for patiently answering all my questions about how the mine worked.

Chapter 9
Strikes and Lock-outs

> *"Men who have worked in other mining fields generally concede that Captain's Flat workers have achieved working conditions equal to, if not better than, those obtained in any other field."* Mr. S. T. Hopkins, Vice-President AWU. Queanbeyan Age *4 September 1953.*

Captain's Flat miners showed signs of militancy as early as 1891 when someone shot the bullocks of non-union teamsters hauling coke for the Commodore Mine. The owner of the bullocks, Mrs Harrison of *Yorkdale,* posted the following reward on the post office window:

> A reward of £20 is posted for the conviction of some persons unknown who maliciously shot three working bullocks belonging to a widow-woman, Elizabeth Harrison.

Her sons were the non-unionists working for the mine.

Miners went out on strike many times over the years — sometimes over matters as trivial as being denied a new pair of gloves — but mainly for better working conditions and a fair deal from management. On two occasions industrial action interrupted mining operations for the better part of a year; the *Big Strike* of 1948-49 and the lock-out in 1954-55 both lasted seven months.

The Big Strike

In October 1948, some 430 workers asked the Lake George Mines Company for an increase in their lead bonus. The company refused, offering them 20 per cent of the mine's profits instead.

The lead bonus originated in Broken Hill where dusty conditions caused tiny particles of lead to work their way into the miners' bloodstream. Owners introduced the lead bonus as compensation for dangerous working conditions. Since the Lake George Mines were wetter than those at Broken Hill, lead poisoning did not affect Captain's Flat miners as seriously. For them, three factors determined their production bonus: the amount of ore mined, its lead content, and fluctuating zinc prices. Captain's Flat miners felt the lead bonus was an important concession to hold on to so they turned down the company's offer for a share in the profits.

The Big Strike was a friendly battle. Both sides appreciated the other's point of view but each was determined to win.

As the months wore on, money became scarce. A strike fund paid £2 to single miners, £2/5/- to married men and 2/6 for each child they supported. The spending power of the town fell from £9000 to £1000 a fortnight. Mine management assured strikers that they would not be evicted from their company-owned homes if they fell behind in their rent.

Most miners turned up for the general manager's Christmas *shout* at the pub. They said that Mr Tyler was doing what any company manager would do under the same circumstances and they did not hold it against him.

In contrast, the 1954-55 lock-out dragged on bitterly.

The Lock-Out

The mining Company went through a difficult period in the 1950s and the miners forfeited their lead bonus to help them out but they drew the line at a company request to work longer hours. On top of that, the miners refused to let outside contractors sink the main shaft deeper. The company suspended operations and sacked 300 men.

Four months later, representatives of the AWU came to an agreement with the Lake George Mines Company conceding the company's right to bring in outside contractors. But Captain's Flat miners would have nothing to do with the agreement until the company promised to re-employ all the men they had locked out.

The lock-out cost mine workers £350,000 in lost wages and the company £750,000 worth of unmined ore. Other unions supported the workers at Captain's Flat by providing strike funds. These were issued to workers as food tickets to ensure that the help went to families — not to the pub.

Miners learned to turn back their electricity meters and keep money that should rightly have gone to the Lake George Mines Company in power charges. One fellow became so good at it that the company thought they had over-charged him. Management officials called him in for a refund.

Although Captain's Flat miners had a reputation for militancy, they improved their working conditions to such an extent that they equalled the best mines in Australia.

Mine management warned its employees that their industrial actions would eventually close the mine. Many people still blame the frequency of pit-top meetings called at 'a drop of the hat' for ruining the miners' chance for continued work at the mines. In the end, however, the mines shut down for the simple reason that there was no more ore to be mined profitably.