

Brian Helsten

Thirty Three

Working in the Iron Industry

For John Hamel most of his life was spent around hard workers like his father, yet John never had many material advantages when he was younger. John had to work to help keep his family going.

John Hamel was the second to the oldest child so he was expected to help the family and went looking for work. He applied at the Republic Mine in the town of Republic located in Marquette County and "I got my foot in the door there," stated John.

"Well when I got to the Republic Mine, I started working underground," said John. John worked in the Republic Mine for about six years. He helped build a rock rif underground and make a room where trucks could dump the loads. He also helped put a crusher underground. John's next job was an electrician at the Tilden Mine in Marquette County. "I guess the main reason I work is to support my family," replied John. John has worked in different mines for tweenty years. After he worked in the Republic Mine, John went to the Empire Mine located a short distance from the Tilden Mine. He worked there for awhile as a welder. Then he went over to the Tilden Mine and worked there as a welder for awhile until there was a posting for an electrician.

"I applied for the electrician posting and I guess I got my foot in the door there," replied John. "There's only me and one other electrician out there," he added. It is not easy for John and his partner because on each shift they only have two electricians. If something breaks down somewhere no matter what the weather conditions they have got to go fix it. John really got his foot in the door there for quite some years. "I think I am going to stay where I am right now; I think I really found a home here," explained John.

"Conditions at the mines have really changed," replied John. When John first started out at the Republic Mine, the conditions were dangerous. --Workers were just waiting for an accident. When he went to work for the Empire Mine, he thought conditions were better than before at the Republic Mine. "When I went to work for the Tilden Mine conditions were a lot better there," stated John. He first worked in the plant as a welder. "The conditions in the plant were a lot better than the pit," said John. When John worked in the pit he would get awfully dirty. The conditions in the mines are much better now.

"Sometimes the company and the union schedule it ahead of time," stated John. John is talking about a strike. Over the years they have had a few strikes. The strikes are hard on the workers and their family. Mostly because they have to budget their money and that means less money for spending. "I guess the worst strike we ever had was a few years ago," replied John. "In 1977 we had a strike that lasted for awhile from August first until about Thanksgiving. But that wasn't the worst one we had. "We had one a few years back worse than the one in 1977," stated John. I'm sure everyone remembers that

one. Well, what the union does is they hold a union meeting to get some ideas from the miners. When the company and the union disagree they go on strike. The miners and the union could not agree on anything at that contract time.

Of course you know that it was tough for the families especially the kids. It was Christmas and a people couldn't get as much as they wanted. But John didn't let the strike bother him. He went out and got another job to fill in until the strike was settled. John's family was more fortunate than many other families.

I really learned a lot from this interview with John. I learned that being a miner is not so easy. I learned that mining ore is very important to places all over the world. I would like to say thank you for all that the miners have done.