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University of California
Berkeley, California

Western Mining in the Twentieth Century Oral History Series
Knoxville District/McLaughlin Mine Project

James William Wilder

OWNER OF ONE SHOT MINING COMPANY: MANHATTAN MERCURY MINE, 1965-1981

With Introductions by
William Casburn and
Donald L. Gustafson

Interviews Conducted by
Eleanor Swent
in 1994 and 1995

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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James William Wilder at Clearlake Cinema, 1985.

Photograph courtesy of Jack E. Thompson, Jr.
Homestake Mining Company

Cataloging information

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Building earth-moving business post-WWII with specialty in mining, mercury mining in Alameda and San Mateo counties, CA; buying the Manhattan Mine in Napa County, CA, 1965, building processing plant, reprocessing batteries; negotiations with Homestake Mining Company when gold was discovered in 1978, development of McLaughlin gold mine, donating profits to benefit Lake County; recollections of Knoxville mining district history.

Introductions by William Casburn, former land manager, and Donald Gustafson, former exploration geologist, Homestake Mining Company

Interviewed in 1994 and 1995 by Eleanor Swent for Knoxville District/McLaughlin Mine Project, Western Mining in the Twentieth Century Oral History Series. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

DONORS TO
THE KNOXVILLE DISTRICT/MCLAUGHLIN MINE PROJECT OF THE
THE WESTERN MINING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY ORAL HISTORY SERIES
1993-1996

The Regional Oral History Office, on behalf of future researchers, would like to express its thanks to the following corporations, organizations, and individuals whose encouragement and support have made possible this oral history project of the Knoxville District/McLaughlin Mine.

Corporations and Organizations
Chemical Lime Company
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Margaret and Douglas Fuerstenau
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Edna and William Humphrey
James H. Jensen
The Kritikos Family, in memory of William Kritikos
Eleanor Swent in memory of Langan Swent
James William Wilder

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PREFACE

The oral history series on Western Mining in the Twentieth Century documents the lives of leaders in mining, metallurgy, geology, education in the earth and materials sciences, mining law, and the pertinent government bodies. The field includes metal, non-metal, and industrial minerals. In its tenth year the series numbers thirty-five volumes completed and others in process.

Mining has changed greatly in this century: in the technology and technical education; in the organization of corporations; in the perception of the national strategic importance of minerals; in the labor movement; and in consideration of health and environmental effects of mining.

The idea of an oral history series to document these developments in twentieth century mining had been on the drawing board of the Regional Oral History Office for more than twenty years. The project finally got underway on January 25, 1986, when Mrs. Willa Baum, Mr. and Mrs. Philip Bradley, Professor and Mrs. Douglas Fuerstenau, Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Heimbucher, Mrs. Donald McLaughlin, and Mr. and Mrs. Langan Swent met at the Swent home to plan the project, and Professor Fuerstenau agreed to serve as Principal Investigator.

An advisory committee was selected which included representatives from the materials science and mineral engineering faculty and a professor of history of science at the University of California at Berkeley; a professor emeritus of history from the California Institute of Technology; and executives of mining companies. Langan Swent delighted in referring to himself as "technical advisor" to the series. He abetted the project from the beginning, directly with his wise counsel and store of information, and indirectly by his patience as the oral histories took more and more of his wife's time and attention. He completed the review of his own oral history transcript when he was in the hospital just before his death in 1992. As some of the original advisors have died, others have been added to help in selecting interviewees, suggesting research topics, and securing funds.

The project was presented to the San Francisco section of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers (AIME) on "Old-timers Night," March 10, 1986, when Philip Read Bradley, Jr., was the speaker. This section and the Southern California section of AIME provided initial funding and organizational sponsorship.

The Northern and Southern California sections of the Woman's Auxiliary to the AIME (WAAIME), the California Mining Association, and the Mining and Metallurgical Society of America (MMSA) were early supporters. Other individual and corporate donors are listed in the

volumes. Sponsors to date include seventeen corporations, four foundations, and ninety-six individuals. The project is ongoing, and funds continue to be sought.

The first five interviewees were all born in 1904 or earlier. Horace Albright, mining lawyer and president of United States Potash Company, was ninety-six years old when interviewed. Although brief, this interview adds another dimension to a man known primarily as a conservationist.

James Boyd was director of the industry division of the military government of Germany after World War II, director of the U.S. Bureau of Mines, dean of the Colorado School of Mines, vice president of Kennecott Copper Corporation, president of Copper Range, and executive director of the National Commission on Materials Policy. He had reviewed the transcript of his lengthy oral history just before his death in November, 1987. In 1990, he was inducted into the National Mining Hall of Fame, Leadville, Colorado.

Philip Bradley, Jr., mining engineer, was a member of the California Mining Board for thirty-two years, most of them as chairman. He also founded the parent organization of the California Mining Association, as well as the Western Governors Mining Advisory Council. His uncle, Frederick Worthen Bradley, who figures in the oral history, was in the first group inducted into the National Mining Hall of Fame in 1988.

Frank McQuiston, metallurgist for the Raw Materials Division of the Atomic Energy Commission and vice president of Newmont Mining Corporation, died before his oral history was complete; thirteen hours of taped interviews with him were supplemented by three hours with his friend and associate, Robert Shoemaker.

Gordon Oakeshott, geologist, was president of the National Association of Geology Teachers and chief of the California Division of Mines and Geology.

These oral histories establish the framework for the series; subsequent oral histories amplify the basic themes. After over thirty individual biographical oral histories were completed, a community oral history was undertaken, documenting the development of the McLaughlin gold mine in the Napa, Yolo, and Lake Counties of California (the historic Knoxville mercury mining district), and the resulting changes in the surrounding communities. This comprises around 120 hours of interviews with nearly forty people.

Future researchers will turn to these oral histories to learn how decisions were made which led to changes in mining engineering education, corporate structures, and technology, as well as public policy regarding minerals. In addition, the interviews stimulate the deposit, by

interviewees and others, of a number of documents, photographs, memoirs, and other materials related to twentieth century mining in the West. This collection is being added to The Bancroft Library's extensive holdings. A list of completed and in process interviews for the mining series appears at the end of this volume.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Willa Baum, division head, and under the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library.

Interviews were conducted by Malca Chall and Eleanor Swent.

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Regional Oral History Office

Eleanor Swent, Project Director
Western Mining in the Twentieth
Century Series

November 1995
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* Deceased during the period of the project

PROJECT HISTORY--Knoxville District/McLaughlin Mine Oral History Project

The development of the McLaughlin gold mine in the Knoxville District of Napa, Lake, and Yolo Counties in California in the last quarter of the twentieth century was a historically significant event. The mines of the district had been major producers of mercury since 1861. In 1888 an official report by G. F. Becker on the quicksilver deposits mentioned the presence of free gold which could be obtained by panning. It took almost a century before this knowledge could be acted upon when Homestake Mining Company signed an agreement with James William Wilder, owner of the Manhattan Mine, in 1978.

Advisors to the oral history series on Western Mining in the Twentieth Century who were also Homestake directors, Professor Douglas Fuerstenau, principal faculty advisor, Clifford Heimbucher, and John Kiely, all urged the Knoxville/McLaughlin oral history project, as did advisor Sylvia McLaughlin, widow of the Homestake chairman for whom the mine was named. It was decided it should be a community oral history, in contrast to the previous volumes in the series which documented individual careers.

The five historically important aspects are: the history of the Knoxville mercury mining district, with its periodic booms and busts; the effects of a large industrial development and influx of technically trained workers in an economically depressed rural area; the efforts to obtain permits to develop a mine near a center of environmental activism; the continuous pressure oxidation system which was pioneered at the McLaughlin processing plant; the reclamation of the mine site. The life of the McLaughlin mine was projected to be about twenty years, and most of the key players were available for interviews. It is a nearly unique opportunity to document the discovery, development, and closing down of a mine while it is happening.

The chronology of the McLaughlin Mine is as follows: in 1961, following publication of a Professional Paper by USGS geologist Ralph J. Roberts, Newmont geologists John S. Livermore and J. Alan Coope found a major deposit of micron-sized gold on the Carlin trend in Nevada. It was economic to mine because of technological advances in explosives and earth-moving equipment, and development of new methods such as heap-leaching for recovery of gold from ore. This led other mining companies to search for similar deposits of "invisible" gold.

In 1969, the National Environmental Protection Act was passed, followed in 1970 by the California Environmental Quality Act.

In the 1970s, "Bill" Wilder, principal of the One Shot Mining Company, was reclaiming batteries for Mallory Company in the furnaces at the Manhattan mercury mine. Environmental concerns had made mercury

mining unprofitable, so Wilder was crushing the beautiful colored rock on his property and selling it as decorative stone. An assay from several years before had showed gold was there, but at that time mercury at $75 a flask was more valuable than gold at $35 an ounce, the official price from January 1934, when the United States went off the gold standard, until 15 March 1968.

In August 1971, President Richard Nixon terminated the convertibility of the dollar into gold, and the price climbed to $700 an ounce in 1980. In 1977, Homestake Mining Company underwent a restructuring and embarked on a program to find a world-class gold mine. Their search revealed geology reports in their files from the 1920s which encouraged exploration at hot springs near the Knoxville mercury mining district of northern California. In 1978 Donald Gustafson, Homestake geologist, visited the Manhattan Mine at the place where Napa, Yolo, and Lake Counties meet.

The history of the Knoxville District begins in 1861 with the incorporation of the Redington quicksilver mine, also known as the XLCR or Knoxville mine, then employing as many as 300 men. The town of Knoxville had thirty or more buildings, including a store, hotel, postoffice, Wells Fargo office, school, and cemetery. In 1872 the state legislature transferred prosperous Knoxville Township from Lake County to Napa County, although it is separated from the Napa Valley by mountain escarpments. Lake County was compensated with a one-time payment of $3500.

In 1869 Knox and Osborn opened the Manhattan Mine on the same lode as the Redington. The Oat Hill or Napa Consolidated Mine was opened in 1872. A report on the metallurgy of quicksilver issued by the Department of the Interior in 1925 says, "In 1874, the Knox continuous shaft-furnace for the treatment of both fine and coarse ores was first used in California." [Bulletin 222, p. 5] The Knox-Osborn design was further augmented by a fine-ore natural-draft furnace developed by mine superintendent Charles Livermore. The district prospered until 1905, for a decade around World War I, and from 1927-1936. Demand for mercury rose during wartime because it was used as a detonator for explosives.

Knoxville was linked by road through Sulphur Canyon with the town of Monticello in fertile Berryessa Valley. Farmers descended from early Scots settlers grew pears, prunes, wheat, and barley and occasionally worked in the mercury mines. After World War II, when California's population was growing rapidly, a dam was built which by 1956 flooded the valley to create Lake Berryessa. It attracted vacationers, and for most of them it was the end of the line. The unpaved road from Lake Berryessa to Knoxville was impassable when rains filled the creek bed. In the other direction, from Knoxville to Clearlake, there was a similar little-used road through Morgan Valley.

Although it is only a few miles from the densely populated San Francisco Bay Area, in 1978 Knoxville township had few telephones, surfaced roads, or bridges. Populated by ranchers, miners, seasonal hunters, and outlaws, it was one of the most economically depressed regions in California, with high unemployment. In 1991, Napa historian Robert McKenzie called it "truly the last frontier of Napa County."

Mining companies are familiar with developing mines in remote and rugged locations, with the attendant logistical problems. In this case, there was the further challenge of obtaining permits to develop a mine in the jurisdiction of three counties, regional and state water quality districts, three regional air quality districts, various state agencies, and the Bureau of Land Management. It took more than five years and cost millions of dollars to secure the 327 required permits which made a stack of paper more than eight feet high. In addition, the ore itself was finely disseminated, fairly low grade, and as it turned out, highly refractory. Traditional methods of beneficiation were ruled out by environmental concerns, so Homestake metallurgists developed a high pressure oxidation system, incorporating technology from South Africa, Germany, Canada, and Finland, which has now been widely copied.

The eventual design was for a mine pit with adjacent crushing plant and a five-mile pipeline to conduct slurry to a zero-discharge processing plant using a variety of technologies, including autoclaves. Reclamation in the mine and on dumps began almost immediately, and at the end of the mine's life, it was to be a part of the Nature Reserve system of the University of California, for research by scholars at both the Berkeley and Davis campuses.

In 1991, the Regional Oral History Office began to explore possibilities for funding the Knoxville/McLaughlin oral history. A four-year project was outlined to include about thirty-five interviews averaging three hours each, for a total cost of $100,000. The initial plan was to schedule and begin interviews with key Homestake and community personnel in the first year, and to transcribe and edit these interviews concurrently with continuing interviews through the second and third years. The fourth year would be devoted to the final editing tasks. The product would be a set of three volumes covering the mercury mining, the gold mining, and the resulting changes in the surrounding community.

The Hearst Foundation granted $20,000 to document the gold mine, and the Mining and Metallurgical Society of America gave $6,000 to document the earlier mercury mining. Homestake and Chemical Lime Company each donated $2,000, which enabled interviewing to begin in March, 1993.

The best laid plans, however, can be spoiled by circumstances beyond control. One of the first names on the list of interviewees was John Ransone, Homestake's construction project director. He sent helpful

background documents in preparation for a scheduled interview; however, before it could be held he died of lung cancer. The project manager for the construction company, Klaus Thiel, in the meantime had been assigned to work in Brisbane, Australia, so he could not be interviewed. Several of the other Homestake people had scattered: James Anderson to Denver, Jack Thompson and John Turney to British Columbia, David Crouch to Salt Lake City, Donald Gustafson to jobs in Namibia and Kazakhstan, Joseph Strapko to Maine. William Humphrey and Richard Stoehr both underwent major surgery.

Similar problems occurred on the list of community leaders. Some died and others moved away. All of this led to a revised plan to use the available funding to press ahead with recording all the interviews, and to leave the processing of the tapes for later.

There is a perception that the former mercury miners are all dead, killed by mercury poisoning. In fact, Dean Enderlin, a geologist at the McLaughlin Mine and also a Napa County native and historian, helped to locate some who were remarkably healthy, and who were interviewed. Elmer Enderlin in his eighties spends summers working at his tungsten prospect in Idaho and winters in Lower Lake. Anthony Cerar, also in his eighties, actively maintains several historic mercury mines, including La Joya and Corona. William Kritikos, operator of the Oat Hill Mine, was nearly 73 when he died following a stroke, but was in good health at the time of his interview. Ed McGinnis, who worked around the Reed Mine as a boy, is still active in his seventies. Bill Wilder, who owned the Manhattan Mine, is a relative youngster in his seventies and in good health in Upper Lake.

By 1996 a number of members of the local communities had been interviewed: a county supervisor from each of the three counties involved, Napa County planners, the Lake County school superintendent, community historians and pioneers, merchants, and ranchers. Some of the most vocal opponents of the mine were also interviewed. Interviews were conducted with most of the Homestake employees involved in the discovery and development of the mine. More interviewing is still needed, and transcribing and processing has hardly begun, stalled by the need to raise further funds.

Two of the interviews were completed in 1996: William Humphrey, who was Homestake's executive vice president of operations in charge of the mine development, and William Wilder, owner of the Manhattan Mine. The oral history of Langan Swent also contains relevant information.

We are grateful to all of the interviewees for their participation. There are many others who have helped also. Homestake Mining Company has cooperated with the project, lending the Regional Oral History Office a computer and printer, and making available for research the archival video tapes and files of newspaper clippings and news releases, as well

as the environmental studies, the environmental impact report, and the environmental impact statement. Early on, a day tour of the property and box lunch were provided for a van load of ROHO staff, interested students, and faculty from the University of California at Berkeley. The conference room at the mine and the San Francisco offices at 650 California Street have been used for interviewing.

James Jensen made available his extensive files on mercury mining and processing and mercury poisoning. Anthony Cerar led a vigorous hike around the Knoxville mine site, identifying foundations of long-gone buildings and workings. John Livermore conducted a tour by jeep of the Knoxville district, and suggested the importance of the Morgan North papers at The Bancroft Library. Staff members gave help at the Napa Register, the Napa Museum, the Sharpsteen Museum in Calistoga, and the Lake County Museums in Lower Lake and Lakeport.

The tapes of all the interviews are available for study at The Bancroft Library. The completed volumes will be available at The Bancroft Library and in the Special Collections at UCLA.

Eleanor Swent, Project Director
Knoxville District/McLaughlin Mine
Oral History Project

February 1996
Regional Oral History Office
The Bacroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION--by William Casburn

I first met Bill Wilder in April 1978. I could not have guessed at the time that this meeting would lead to a lasting friendship with one of the most interesting and challenging people I have ever met. If I was a professional author Bill would be excellent material for Readers Digest under the category of "One of the most unforgettable people I have ever met."

Don Gustafson, who is credited with the discovery of McLaughlin deposit--as the result of what I consider to be brilliant conceptual thinking, had sampled the property in February, 1978 and sent the samples in for assaying. The results showed interesting gold content, and the pressure was on to acquire the property. Ken Jones, who was the head of exploration, met with Bill to negotiate a deal; however, it soon became clear that if a deal could be made at all, it would involve protracted negotiations and although Ken was a very capable negotiator he realized that it would require considerable expenditure of his time and would take him away from managing the exploration program. I was Land Manager for Homestake so Ken asked me to accompany him on his next trip to the property in April, 1978, to meet Bill Wilder and his wife Kay.

I recall it was a beautiful spring day and I was thinking what a lovely day for spring skiing in the Sierras. I seem to recall that we were early so I asked Ken to give me a tour of the property. My first reaction occurred when we passed Bill's boneyard, or what accountants might loosely describe as his inventory of spare parts. I have been accused of being a pack rat, but I concluded at the time that this was the ultimate pack rat. I have seen pictures of abandoned islands in the South Pacific strewn with equipment abandoned by the Americans--a total environmental disaster.

I discovered later that Bill had a mental note of every piece of equipment in his salvage yard and he knew where every item was located. Today salvage yards use computers to inventory and locate spare parts. I remember seeing a 1936 Ford truck and other vintage vehicles. I was astounded when Bill told me much later that he had the repair manuals for all of these vehicles---not that he needed them, because I discovered later that Bill is, in my view, a mechanical genius. We then looked at his mercury recovery plant and I said to Ken there is no way this plant can work. We looked at his rock plant, which Bill had built because recovery of mercury at that time was uneconomical.

Bill was crushing and selling in the San Francisco Bay area decorative rock, much of which contained significant gold values, although Bill did not know this at the time. It was very difficult to explain this to Bill because the company was taking a low key approach

and the results were still tentative; the property was not tied up and we were concerned about getting the owners overly excited. Of course it turned out later that this latter fear was not justified because Bill did not believe there was economically recoverable gold on the property and as he stated later if I make a deal your company is going to explore the property, and decide there isn't a gold deposit, walk away from it and leave me to deal with the local officials who now leave me alone. He explained that he only had to satisfy the federal officials that he did not have any environmental, safety or health problems. This was to become a big stumbling block throughout the six months of negotiations with Bill.

We finished the tour and met with Bill and Kay in their double wide trailer which was nicely furnished, neat, clean, and comfortable but my thoughts were somewhat negative. I considered the prospect was at least a 1000 to 1 shot, that I was meeting with a professional pack rat that made me look like an amateur and the man had to be totally impractical, because no one could hope to make that mercury plant work. Of course I discovered later that the plant had worked, and later Bill received some important contracts to recover mercury from batteries supplied by major companies who could not recover it as economically as Bill. As a professional negotiator I had long since learned not to jump to conclusions and to keep an open mind because in the past I had encountered some very unpleasant surprises, by forming opinions before I had adequate information. So the question was, did these first impressions fit the character of this man across the table from me.

As it turned out later my instincts were wrong, and I ended up negotiating with one of the most challenging individuals I have had the pleasure to meet in my entire career. I quickly realized here is a very bright person, self-educated, a very shrewd negotiator and judge of character with almost a pit bull's tenacity in refusing to move ahead into the next stage of negotiations until he completely understood what we were proposing. This became even more apparent later when we offered to buy out Bill's interest. However, at this point we were involved in trying to lease his property so we could explore it in depth.

I am usually somewhat talkative and I have to constantly remind myself during negotiations to listen so I can assess the character, needs, and desires of the other party. On this particular day I was silent, and later when Bill and Kay and I became good friends and reminisced about these early discussions they had decided to be very guarded about what they said, because they had concluded that I was sitting there taking in every word and this might compromise them later. Although I do not volunteer the fact that I am an attorney as well as a geologist, this fact came out during the conversation and made them even more cautious, although I always explain that I do not represent the company as an attorney and my role is simply as a negotiator. Of course,

it was much later that they told me about their concerns, I confessed to them that I was actually daydreaming and thinking of spring skiing and wondering what am I doing here when I would rather be skiing.

From time to time Bill invites me to stay overnight at his place in Upper Lake, a beautiful peaceful ranch nestled in the hills. Bill and I spend hours recounting many of the humorous experiences we had and comparing our thoughts at the time, which frequently differed considerably from what each of us was thinking.

The negotiations continued for more than six months. I was under extreme pressure to close the deal because Ken Jones and Don Gustafson were talking about odds of ten to one that Bill's property contained a major gold deposit. These were remarkable odds based on my experience in the industry, but I had great difficulty convincing Bill. I had despaired of ever making a deal with Bill and I was resigned to the fact that my tenure with the company would be rather short, although I was confident if we could not make a deal no one else could, and of course a lot of companies were in the running. I always appreciated the fact that Bill negotiated with us in good faith and did not play one company against the other, but that is the kind of man he is. We spent many enjoyable weekends together and I always enjoyed our meetings because he is such an interesting person and a man of many talents.

We had submitted to Bill our standard lease agreement, which with a person like Bill is simply a starting point or basis for discussion. Of course Bill virtually tore the agreement apart. I was not surprised because I had encountered objections from prospectors and small miners, so every change Bill proposed I asked him write it in between the lines or I would use Bill's language and write it in and then have Bill initial it, if he agreed to the change. In this way we virtually rewrote the whole agreement as a series of scrawls and marginal notes.

Negotiations had continued on for so long that I had given up hope of making a deal and was trying to think of a way to tell the company. I realized as the messenger bearing bad news I would be shot. I recall a similar experience some years before with another company. They took away my card to the executive dining room and the key to the executive washroom, which they considered to be a worse disgrace than being fired. The dining room was too expensive and the few times I used the washroom I never saw anyone in it. I concluded the executives were too busy to use a washroom.

I had decided that our standard agreement needed to be revised, and what better qualified person could I find to help me with this revision than Bill Wilder. One of the tactics in negotiations is called investment of time: that is to say you get the other person to invest so much time in the negotiations that he decides he might as well go ahead

and sign the deal. I must confess that I did not have this tactic in mind when I was negotiating with Bill. I had long since given up but since our meetings were always very pleasant I hung in there. Bill has always credited me with a very clever negotiating strategy, a compliment I did not really deserve, and I have not had the courage until now to confess that I wasn't smart enough in those days to use that device.

In any event, according to Bill it worked, and he finally signed the agreement. He was impressed with this approach, and when he talks about it I feel guilty. Now the truth is out that it was a tactic born of desperation, and since this story will appear in my book called "Stumbling Through Life," I don't want Bill to read this account in my book because I value his friendship. I hope he will forgive me for not speaking out over the years when he was giving me credit for something every used car salesman does as part of their routine.

When I submitted the signed agreement for review the chief counsel was horrified. He explained to me that when he had said that I could make changes in an agreement he did not mean that I could rewrite the entire agreement. I explained that this was the only agreement we would get, and after review by Harry Conger and Jim Anderson that turned out to be the official version that went into the files

I could fill many pages with humorous anecdotes about Bill and our experiences. I remember one in particular which involved Bill and his son Billy. Bill did not have much respect for attorneys and insisted on doing most of his own legal work in the early days of the property, which led to complications for us later; however, that's another story. But he had even less respect for environmental officials, or for that matter any officials. We were sitting having coffee early one morning in Bill's trailer when Billy dropped by to join us. Bill and I had spent a very late night toasting each other and many other things so we were not quite as sharp as we might have been. In fact I would definitely have had trouble skiing that day, which is my way of measuring how much I have had to drink the night before. As we were sitting at the table we heard a loud boom, and I saw Bill and Billy duck their heads. One of them said well, I guess that was a sonic boom, and I said naively, "What else could it have been?" Bill said well, it could have been the dynamite they keep in the office, which was only a short distance from the house.

As we sat there chatting Bill explained to Billy that the company felt they could not move ahead with the project unless they invited the county officials to tour the property. Although Bill had been operating for several years they had never been on the property, and they ignored what he was doing because he was in a remote part of the county. Bill said, "What do we do if they show up at the gate?" Billy's reply was, "Shoot them."

I can try to sum up Bill Wilder by saying that here is a man who when people said he could not do something he went ahead and did it. He is an entrepreneur who had the faith of his convictions. Unlike most of us, he would have trouble working for someone else. He has great faith in himself, and like all prospectors and small miners he was willing to gamble. An unusual person who I was fortunate to have met through a quirk of fate, because if we had never discovered the McLaughlin deposit our paths would probably have never crossed.[1]

William Casburn
Former land manager, Homestake
Mining Company

February 1996
Incline Village, NV

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[1]Mr. Wilder's response to this introduction is inserted on pp. 106-107.

INTRODUCTION--by Donald L. Gustafson

It was a cool, misty day in February 1978 when I first visited the Manhattan mercury mine in the Coast Ranges of northern Napa County, California. I was a geologist with Homestake Mining Company at the time exploring for potential gold deposits in the Coast Ranges. The reason for visiting the Manhattan mercury mine was to determine if any anomalous or significant gold values were associated with the mercury mineralization, a geologic concept I had developed, the Mercury-Hot Springs-Gold model concept. I was examining numerous historic mercury mines in the area and a literature review indicated the Manhattan mine might have favorable characteristics that would prove my concept.

As I drove through the open gate and observed the array of obsolete city busses, 55-gallon drums, various rusty equipment and parts and last, but not least, sitting on a small hill, an antique one-yard shovel that had obviously not operated for decades, I wondered what I was driving into. My concerns were enhanced further as I approached the maintenance building and saw a half dozen watch dogs milling around and individuals of questionable character working on a piece of equipment. My first thought was to quickly drive out the way I came in and not get out of my vehicle, but I decided I was there to obtain permission from the owner to examine his property, had driven five hours to get there, and the geological literature sounded like this area might have potential.

I introduced myself to the workers and requested permission to look at the surface mineralization. They informed me the "Boss" was not there, but would be back in about an hour and I should wait for him. Sure enough the "Boss" arrived in due course. He emerged from an old beat-up pickup that had seen better days. The "Boss" was Mr. Bill Wilder, a rather large individual with a constant smile on his face and a determined stride. We introduced ourselves and I told Bill I was a geologist for Homestake and would like his permission to examine the surface of his property to determine the mineral potential. "Well", he said "hop in the pickup and I will show you around." For the next five hours Bill talked and I listened as he told me all about his operation, how he got there, past production figures and the geological features.

My initial impression of the situation was turned around 180 degrees after meeting Bill and the people working for him. They were all as friendly and congenial as could be and a delight to visit with. My only problem with Bill, initially, was that I could not get away from him to look at some geological features I wanted to examine and sample, to get on with my geologic work. But Bill was so interesting to listen to that I decided I would listen to him and learn and leave the sampling for another day.

After a complete tour of the property (I guess Bill did not get many visitors and was going to take this opportunity to bend the ear of someone new), we adjourned to his double-wide trailer to further discuss the property and of course Bill's life story. Again I listened and Bill talked. Bill had textbooks, maps and literature on processing mercury ore that told me here was a man of intelligence, a self-taught person, with a real thirst for knowledge and desire to learn everything he could about the world around him. A truly remarkable individual.

I returned the next day to continue my examination of the property and more discussions with Bill. Bill was savvy enough to know since I worked for Homestake my interest in the property must be for gold mineralization and not just "minerals" as I had originally stated. The second evening Bill and his wife Kay invited me to dinner and Bill brought out Becker's 1888 publication on mineral deposits of northern California and showed me the section on the Manhattan mine. Mention was made of gold being detected in the pyrite, a statement I was not aware of until Bill pointed it out to me. Bill said he had a sample assayed years before and it did have significant gold in it, but he did not think much of it. The Coast Ranges were known for their mercury mines and not gold mines. The mention of Becker's report and Bill's assay increased my interest in the area as a potential gold deposit. The area later became Homestake's McLaughlin gold mine and is still producing today. After dinner we all continued our discussions into the late evening hours and I learned more of both Bill and Kay's background and adventurous life.

Bill and his associates received significant compensation from Homestake when the gold mine developed. I am sure he thought I was crazy to be looking for gold in that environment back in 1978, but he is probably happy that I did and it really changed his lifestyle. Even though his lifestyle changed, the big, burly man with the smile did not change and to this day he is the same friendly person driving around in his old pickup. Over the years Bill and I developed a lasting friendship and even though I do not get the opportunity to see him often anymore I consider him a true friend and am sure if I met him tomorrow it would be like old times.

Donald L. Gustafson
Consulting Economic Geologist

February 1996
Reno, Nevada

INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Eleanor Swent

The James William Wilder oral history is central in the documentation of the Knoxville District and the development of the McLaughlin Mine in the series on Western Mining in the Twentieth Century. Wilder owned and operated the Manhattan mercury mine where gold was found in 1978 by Homestake geologists.

His story has become legendary and easily mythologized. Mining history is filled with stories of capricious bonanza discoveries, but this is not one of them. The reader of the Wilder oral history will learn of many hours spent in library research and in creative mechanical invention. This account proves that chance favors the prepared mind.

Wilder was born in the Mission District in San Francisco in 1924. His father and grandfather owned and operated tugboats and barges. Bill attended Lick-Wilmerding and Balboa schools, although they failed to interest him. He served in the Army Air Corps and after his discharge began a business in earth moving, which extended to mining. He worked at various chrome and mercury mines around the San Francisco Bay area, at New Idria, and at a complex copper-gold-silver mine near Monitor Pass. He made useful friendships and built a reputation for hard work and mechanical ingenuity.

By the time he met the owners of the Manhattan Mine and formed One Shot Mining Company, he was ready with know-how, equipment, and enough capital to buy the mine and start mining mercury on his own. Later on, he had a contract reclaiming batteries for Mallory. Some passersby scoffed at his multicolored processing plant and "boneyard" of used equipment, but the last laugh was his. The frugality of buying paint on sale and cannibalizing parts paid off in rewards down the line. He found out from assays that there was gold in the Manhattan ore, but at that time the gold price was fixed at $35 an ounce and mercury was more valuable. When he bargained with Homestake gold was around $600 an ounce, spiking to over $700.

Today Bill Wilder still lives in Upper Lake, donating to and investing in local enterprises which benefit the community, such as the firehouse, library, and movie theater. He is a good source of information on the history of the entire district, as well as the Manhattan Mine.

Wilder was interviewed at the McLaughlin Mine office on 17 June 1994 and at the Redbud Motel in Nice, California, on 23 June 1995. The transcripts were sent to him for his review, and he returned them promptly with few changes.

Introductions were written by William Casburn, former land manager for Homestake Mining Company, and Donald Gustafson, former exploration geologist for Homestake. Mr. Casburn sent his introduction to Wilder for review; Wilder's response is inserted following Chapter VIII.

The tapes of the interviews are available for study at The Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

Eleanor Swent
Interviewer/Editor

February 1996
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Your full name: James W. Wilder

Date of Birth: 4/4/24 Birthplace: San Francisco, CA

Father's full name: Will F. Wilder

Occupation: Boating (Tugs and barges) Birthplace: San Francisco, CA

Mother's full name: Anne J. Anderson (Wilder) Birthplace: _____

Occupation: Homemaker

Your spouse: Bette J. Scully (Wilder) - Katherine J. Cottle (Wilder)

Occupation: Homemaker - Librarian, Homemaker

Your children: (Bette J. Wilder) - William John Wilder, Linda A Austin, Jeffrey F., Wilder, Kelley Wacaser

Where did you grow up: San Francisco, CA

Present Community: Lake County, CA, Upper Lake

Education: Graduated High School, Several (6-7) Aircorp technical schools

Occupations (s): Mining, construction, mechanics, earth work, subdivisions, tug boats

Areas of Expertise: Plant installation and design

Other interests or activities: Collecting old cars, trucks and farm machinery

Organizations in which you are active: Society of Mining Engineers, Society of Automotive Engineers, Lions Club, VFW and American Legion.

I GROWING UP IN SAN FRANCISCO, 1924-1945

[Interview 1: June 17, 1994]##

Well-Known Family in the Tug and Barge Business

Swent: Well, Bill, let's find out about you, where you were born and what you did before you were a miner.

Wilder: I was born in San Francisco, born down in the Mission District of San Francisco. An interesting thing, I think still today, is I was baptized in the old Mission Dolores, the old mission.

Swent: You were?

Wilder: Yes, which goes back in history a little bit there, you know.

Swent: Yes, it certainly does.

Wilder: Maybe that got me started in history, you know.

Swent: Yes. When were you born, Bill?

Wilder: April 4, 1924.

Swent: Was your family from San Francisco?

Wilder: Oh, yes. My father was born in San Francisco, in 1895, I think, something like that. My grandfather came there about 1860, came to San Francisco and started in the boating business, knew a lot of people. The boating business was fairly well known. My dad was, too. In the tugs and barges.

Swent: They had tugs.

Wilder: Tugs and barges, yeah. Harry Conger [head of Homestake Mining Company] ran into Tom Crowley [head of Crowley Marine Company] on an airplane. He said, "Gosh, I met a fellow named Tom Crowley and

I asked him, I said, 'Gee, we're doing some business with a fellow named Wilder.' And he said, 'Oh, Willie.'" And that was my dad. He knew my dad pretty good. That's when Harry saw me. He said, "Gee, I ran into this guy who knew your dad pretty well." So it was kind of interesting, you know, to go back in time a little bit.

My grandfather came up here to Lake County. Let's see. That was around 1905, I think. He was not feeling good. He was sick and he came up here to Adams Resort. I have a letter that he wrote to his wife, Margaret, which would be my grandmother. I never did know her or know my grandfather. But he stayed at Adams Springs. And he had a good sense of humor because it's a hilarious letter in the way he's talking about Lake County. That was primitive times, you know. [See Appendix.]

Swent: People came up here then for their health.

Wilder: For their health, yes. Adams Springs is like Seigler's and those mineral springs. You know, they have more different kinds of springs than you can shake a stick at.

Swent: What was your grandfather's name?

Wilder: Oh, that was Jim.

Swent: Jim.

Wilder: Yes, James. That's right because I was named after him. I don't know what his middle name was, now. Just Jim. He had some of the tugs named Jim First or Jim Wilder #1 and then two. But then the Helen and the Margaret; they were all named after family members. He had a lot of boats at one time there. There's some stuff in the Maritime Museum down there. There's a collection on D.W. and R.Z. Dickey. They were the designers of some of the boats; they designed them for my grandfather.

Had a fellow come up while I was here, as a matter of fact. It must have been about two years ago, now. And he bore some relation from way back, you know, kind of a cousin or I don't know what the devil he is, really, that way. But he's some sort of relation. He was doing some work at that museum at that time. He was quite an interesting guy. He knew a lot more than I do about the tug boats, you know, because he researched it.

Swent: But the tugboat business wasn't one that you wanted to stick with?

Wilder: Well, I stayed with it quite a bit. You know, I was a kid and then I went away and I worked on the tugs all the time up until I

went away to the service which I got in at the ripe old age of eighteen. I couldn't wait to get in, you know. My God, you've got to see what's happening in this world.

Swent: Which high school did you go to?

Wilder: Balboa, Mission. Lick-Wilmerding, I went there, which was a good school. But it was hard. You had to work. Balboa was easy. You could goof off, especially if you--

Swent: You must have been a pretty good student if you went to Lick.

Wilder: Terrible student [laughter]. Well, I went to Lick-Wilmerding, yes. That gave me about a two-year start on a public school. So then when I went to Balboa, I had two years to goof off, do nothing, you know. I wasn't a bad student in what I wanted to do but I guess the things I didn't agree with I didn't do too good and I just didn't do, you know.

Swent: Then you went into the service.

Wilder: Yes, I graduated. Well, actually I got my diploma because I graduated three times there, supposedly, but I'd get something where I'd get kicked out of class or something and end up they can't graduate you because you didn't finish the semester on this one subject or something. I was not really a bad student. I thought I was pretty good as far as things that I wanted to do that were important, I thought. Didn't agree with the school the whole time, though. But it worked out. I got a diploma anyhow and the military was good for me in a way.

World War II: Service in the Army Air Corps

Swent: Were you in the Navy?

Wilder: No, I went into--I saw a movie. It was about the Army Air Corps. Boy, I went down and it was about six or seven of us went down and talked to the recruiter. I think I wasn't even old enough when I first got that idea. So then I couldn't get in, you know. So I graduated from school, basically. Worked for Soule Steel for a little while building landing craft. Then I could enlist. I went in in October of '42. And I turned eighteen in April of '42. So I didn't have a lot of time. I had some time to work and I took a vacation, kind of. Three kids goofing off, we went to Mexico and all eighteen, you know. Big challenge of life.

Then we came back and we all went in the service together and about three or four other guys that we all hung around, you know, kids, we all went into the Army Air Corps. It was the Army Air Corps, too. They kept changing it. "Nothing could stop the Army Air Corps." Then the next, it was, "Nothing could stop the Army Air Force." And then, "Nothing could stop the US Air Force." They kept changing the song, here.

Swent: Did you get overseas?

Wilder: I ended up in South Pacific, you know, in the Marianas. And was on B-29s. Over here I was on Cessna Bobcats and B-17s for a little bit. But basically B-29s.

Swent: When did you come back?

Wilder: I came back and left over there, I think it was around December [1945]. It seems to me I came back on a troop ship, then, because that's when they were having a terrible time getting everybody--everybody wanted to go home. I wanted to go home and so did everybody on the island. They didn't go along with that, too good. Didn't have enough transportation, I guess. They still kept the 29s there. So they shipped a bunch of us on--I went to Saipan. In Saipan I got on a Navy ship and came home on that.

There wasn't even--gosh, we hit the dock in San Francisco and I said, "God, I want to make a phone call. This is my hometown." I mean, this is military and how stringent they generally are.

"Hey, go ahead."

So I made a phone call and said, "Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad. I'm home. Come down and pick me up." That was it. I got off the boat.

The guy said, "You meet us up in Pittsburg at Camp Stoneman, now." I think I had three days, or something like four days. No pass, nothing. It was just like home.

Swent: Well, the war was over.

Wilder: Yes, war was over. So then I took a couple of kids with me and we went to my place. One of them lived over in the East Bay so we drove him out there. Then I picked him up and we all went to Stoneman and then from there we went to Beale up there at Marysville. I was there for a day or so and they got me out. That was all there was to it. It was really pretty good. I had no complaints there.

Swent: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Wilder: I have one sister and one half brother. That was my mother's son and her husband had died. He's in Los Angeles. He's a little older than me. I think he's--when the heck was he born? He was born in 1920, I think. My sister's a year younger than I am. She still lives down in Pleasanton. She was married to a doctor and he died. Then she was married to a baseball scout and then he died. She's really been lucky; she married good guys. I think they were real good guys. Both of them knew the mine up here.

Ed, the doctor--he used to come up here all the time. Come up here hunting. I liked him. He was a good man. He used to take care of our emergency supplies. He always made sure I got this for relief; for a snake bite, do this; for this, do this. He'd be giving me a crash medical course.

We lived so far from everything up here, in the middle of--all dirt roads. To go to Lower Lake, going fast, took about forty-five minutes. That's going along pretty fast. We would shake the car apart. So if you had somebody that was in bad shape, there was no hospital in there, either. They built that Redbud [Hospital] after. The closest hospital would have been Napa or Saint Helena, which is about a tossup really in distance.

II TRUCKING CONTRACTOR IN CONSTRUCTION AND MINING PROJECTS

Starting with a Partnership and One Dump Truck

Swent: Let's go back just a little bit. You got out of the Air Force and then did you go to work for your dad for a while?

Wilder: Yes, worked for a little bit. And I saw some guys with dump trucks and talking to them and this has got to be the best business in the world. So I went in and bought it with a friend of mine at an auto wreckers, an older guy. And he said, "I'll put up the dough. We'll buy a truck. You run the truck." And I had a pretty good hand at that stuff so I learned how to drive a truck and all this stuff. I mean, you know, it was kind of like a professional. So I stayed with that and then I bought him out after about a year.

Swent: You were contracting with people?

Wilder: Yes, just doing what they call now, a Public Utilities Commission permit and was for hire. They had OPA rates and all this. We did work for Healey & Tibbits, San Francisco outfits, Guy F. Atkinson, worked in a lot of those projects, you know.

Swent: Construction.

Wilder: Oh, yes, construction. Yes, I can go down there like at Hunter's Point, the big crane. Oh, I worked for Piombo on that with the truck. I worked for Eaton & Smith. Guy F. Atkinson on the freeways. You can go and put all these things together. Something left there, you've got little monuments after you're done, you know.

Swent: Where you used your truck.

Wilder: Yes, I enjoyed that in a way. That was good. Worked, did that for quite a while and then did a haul job for a mine, for some people. It was a chrome mine up out of Livermore and we did the hauling. I think there was about four of us that worked together all the time, three of us, and are still friends. We did this hauling job.

Hauling Chrome Ore from Above Livermore to San Jose

Swent: What were you hauling?

Wilder: We hauled chrome ore on Mocho Road down to a mill in San Jose.

Swent: From the mine to a mill.

Wilder: From the mine to the mill. The mill was, well, we'd make two loads a day from up on the top of the mountain down to Hillyer Avenue in San Jose which was, that was about a twelve-thirteen hour day to get two loads.

Swent: And there was a chrome mill in San Jose?

Wilder: Oh, yes. Chromite, yes. That was a government program under Eisenhower, strategic stockpiles. That was all shipped to Grants Pass, [Oregon]. There's still a stockpile up there of chromite ore. You know, for factories or for the metal, ferrochrome. So we hauled on that, had trouble getting our money from the guy that we were working for. The mining company was a small outfit, Palo Alto Mining. But they were good people.

Swent: Was it an open pit?

Wilder: Yes, it was open pit, a little loader and--well, that's when we started out. The guy we were working for was loading the dumps from back in 1888. That's an interesting thing, too. Mining is a fascinating business, that way. You run into diversified--

Now, I was at a party some place and Carl Wente, who was the president of Bank of America, was there. He was asking me what I was doing and I'm just a bare-faced boy as far as that goes in a big economic role. But I said, "Oh, mining up on Cedar Mountain, you know."

And Wentes have a winery down below there, down on the road to Mocho. So he said, "Oh, you're up there?" He said, "I used to have a mine up there back in--" oh, gee whiz, when did he tell me?

It was a long time before, because Carl Wente was a fairly, pretty old man then. It wasn't like an old man, but by my standards at that time, he was, you know. He said, "I used to have a mine up there, that magnesite mine."

I said, "Oh, yes. I knew it all real well."

So it gave us something to talk about a little bit. He had sold the mine. And the guy that bought it from him I don't think ever made any money. But Carl Wente did by selling it, by getting out of it. [laughs] But he didn't do too bad with the Bank of America, anyhow. That was kind of interesting.

That was one little thing that kind of opened my eyes. You do; you run into more people from different walks of life than you would in normal businesses. You could have almost any other kind of a thing and you run into real small circles. The mining gets real big circles because there are a lot of people--well, they could be making computers or they can be selling shoes and they're still all running in the same circles more or less.

The Fantasy of Finding Gold

Swent: That was your first brush with mining.

Wilder: That was the first good thing. Before that, I remember I'd worked up in Weed. Well, we were doing hauling. This was in '51, '52. I went up to Eureka in '51 on Buhner Point. It was the first atomic plant of any size in California. Worked on building a sea wall and breakwater for that for Mercer-Frazier up there for about six, seven months, I guess. It was kind of neat. I liked that up there. We finished that up and had good equipment.

The four of us worked together and we picked up pretty good jobs. We did one for Long Bell Lumber Company up in Weed. That was cleaning a pond up there. The mill pond would get all these sinker logs in there and so they wanted to clean them out. We had some time off for something. I can't remember. Maybe a crane was down or something that was cleaning them. But we had two days or so.

So we went touring up there and went up by Scotts Bar, that Seiad Valley and up there by the Klamath River. That's where we saw Major Waite. He was kind of a promoter; maybe not. I never really knew him that well, talked to him quite a bit, but I didn't

really know him that well. But he was running some chrome operations up there.

And this really, boy, I mean, all of a sudden--you know, you have this kind of thing as a kid even. You read about mining and this and that. It's sort of a little fantasy, you know. Almost everybody has that, I think. I mean, to go down and you're going to pick up a nugget and there it is, you know. It's a school boy fantasy and there still is some validity to it in a way, too, because it happens.

So anyhow, that really got us all wound up in it. So then we did this hauling job that same year. Things get steered, I think, maybe--I'm not religious, you know, relatively not; went to a Catholic school--but I think that somebody has a hand in lining these things up because here we've got all this interest really wound up from these few days of bumming around the mines and that.

Supplementing the Fantasy with Hard Work and Research

Wilder: One was at Siskon. That was a mine we went to, the Siskon up there out of Dillon Creek. It's out of Happy Camp. It's Forks of Salmon, in that country. Then we came down and we got this job hauling from a mine. Well, this really interested me then. I really started looking into this, you know, trying to learn everything I can about the mineralogy of the thing and how this occurs and what it occurs with.

III EXPANDING INTO MINING AND HAULING

Palo Alto Mining Company

Wilder: And Palo Alto Mining Company, the next year, they knew we were having trouble getting our money from the contractor that was doing the work for them. So they asked me if I was interested. "Would you like to do the mining and the hauling next year?"

And I went, "Oh well, I wasn't in any position for all this." But he talked to me quite a bit. So I bought a shovel, a power shovel and an old loader, dozer, and I had the trucking equipment. So we took the whole job.

It was based on production. We had a percentage like a royalty but we had a percentage like of the ore. We had to lease some of the mines, then. And the mill paid us. I don't know, we split something like fifty-fifty or forty-sixty or something. I can't remember now. But at any rate, it depended on what kind of ore we produced and how much of it. That was the first education that boy, the chicken today and feathers tomorrow.

We had some good runs. All beautiful days when--usually only it happened when things looked the darkest and oh, you're wondering. I've got to pay for the shovel. I've got to pay for the loader. I've got this and that. Then I've got the hauling equipment. I always keep my own stuff pretty well free and clear. You know, at least, pretty well paid up. I don't believe in going into hock on things.

Swent: You had other people working for you, now?

Wilder: Well, the three of us were partners.

Swent: I see. What were their names?

Wilder: That was Jim Hendren and Frank Turner.

Swent: And who were you talking to at Palo Alto Mining?

Wilder: Steve Ridgeley and George Carlson and Fred Smith. Steve Ridgely was from back in Maryland or something. But he lived in Campbell. And Fred Smith, who was a farmer and a contractor down there, an old man, good old man, nice guy.

Swent: So they leased the mine to you.

Wilder: Yes, well, the mines belong to Garbinis and--I'm trying to remember the people who were involved. Garbinis and Mrs. Wagner was one, I remember, that used to have a fruit stand over there by Dublin. There used to be kind of a little restaurant/fruit stand there. I guess that would be Dublin. Yes, before you hit the highway, Highway 50 there. And she had one of the mines. And Garbini was the constable or sheriff of Livermore. And his family had them. And then La Fons had the French laundry. I'm trying to remember--maybe somebody else. That was an interesting place up there. It was good mines. They did a lot of work. And it was chicken today, feathers tomorrow.

We did learn that, that when you have good ore everybody gets lazy because you know, now you've got money coming in real easy. But then the good ore peters out, and now you've got some pretty hungry ore and it's pretty small. That came along to the point where it was getting pretty desperate. We just weren't making it. The other two partners said, "This is no good. We're not doing it."

But the only trouble was, the shovel was all payments and the loader and the shovel, they were all mine because I was the only one that had any real assets at that time. The truck was paid for and the house was just about paid for. So I was in hock for all this stuff. So I can't just say, "Well, okay, let's quit." Not with the bills. Anyhow, they did pull out of it.

This is another thing. It makes you kind of religious in some respects. It was pretty bleak. I was worrying. Plenty worried, you know, because my God--. My dad would bail me out, I guess, if I--he always did if I ever got in real trouble. He'd bail me out but he was not one that was just going to come out and throw money at me. He never did. If I needed money, I could get money. But I'd pay interest on it. I used to fight like heck about it.

But we were pretty close. He was with me on almost anything. In the tough times, I could always depend on my dad, pretty good.

And he was a pretty smart guy and real good at numbers and stuff. He could run a string of numbers up in his head faster than you could on an adding machine. He was good, real good.

A Desperate Time Just Before Finding Good Ore

Wilder: But things got really bad there at one time. And they both said, "Oh, we're getting out of this." Okay, I don't have a choice. I got to stay with this. So they left. And the next day, I was up there mining. I was going to get a load out and get it down to the mill and try and get a couple of loads so that I got some dough coming in all the time, you know.

So I worked on that pretty good and by gosh, by the end of that day, I moved a lot of dirt. By the end of that day, the ore that we had seen that was standing pretty much vertical, it was maybe, oh, six inches wide. That was pretty good ore. And it was sort of widening out and pretty soon I had a face that was twenty-five foot wide, just solid good ore. And this was why I want to talk about somebody looking out for you.

So I called up both the partners and I said, "Hey, this thing is changing." I mean, really, you can't believe how it changed. We got the best ore we've ever seen up there.

So Frank came back. Frank said, "Gee, I'd like to come back."

Jim said, "No. I walked out of it when it was bad and I'm not going to--"

I said, "Hey, you know, there's no controlling this."

He said, "No. I'll stay out of it." So Jim never did come back.

Frank came up there and we ran that good ore out. Then, like I said, you get lazy. And then it got to be, "Gee, I don't think I'll make a load down to the mill." Well, this is bad thinking. In other words, when you've got time, get ahead of the game. Don't just try to stay even. And that was one thing I could see that was wrong. We weren't getting along on that. But anyhow, it finally did peter out and I had a tough winter. Trouble. Oh, my gosh. That was the worst winter I ever had.

Swent: When was this, about '54?

Wilder: No, no. It was way before that. This was in fifty, let's see, '52, '53, about '54. The big flood was in '55. Fifty-three. The winter of '53. By gosh, I couldn't get in and out of the mine and I had a whole month's haul and into the mill and it got so wet they couldn't get it through the crusher or anything. So then, this is kind of funny how it goes. Maybe I'm taking too much time.

Swent: No, no.

Wilder: But anyhow, I remember having all this ore in there and then there was no money coming in because this ore isn't going through the mill. It's sitting in a big pile. Oh, boy. Then all of a sudden, I've got the bank is saying, you know, you've got payments on those things. But the payments on the house were nothing.

Swent: Where was your house?

Wilder: In Los Altos. But when I bought it, I sold the house I had in San Francisco which my dad talked me into buying. Then I worked on it and sold the trucking business in the meantime to the port engineer for Johnson Steamship Company. He and his brother bought the trucking business I had. So I had a year there that I worked in the tugs, off and on, you know, when it was a fairly long run where we'd run for three or four days. I'd go along as deck hand and that.

So then I'd work on this house that I'd bought. In San Francisco, twenty-eight hundred dollars for a house and lot now. Pretty cheap. It was out on 104 Congo Street. So, I worked like a dog in that house and got through with it. We lived there for a year.

Swent: You were married?

Wilder: Oh, yes. Betty and I were married and I had Billy and Linda. I had two children. So we had this house and my dad had financed the thing. I think I had payments, oh, I must have owed him about two thousand dollars. So it was something, real big money then. But I sold that house then, in '51 to an outfit. Fifty-one, fifty-two. Right in the beginning there. I sold it to a guy for $7,500 or $7,900. I thought, my God. I couldn't believe it. That was so much money then. That was a lot of money.

Swent: Sure it was.

Wilder: And now, certainly, $7,900 wouldn't even buy a car.

Swent: No.

Wilder: But I sold it and I went down to Los Altos, bought a house. It was around $13,000 something. So we moved down there. That was kind of neat. Gee, the house is worth about a half a million dollars today. Things have changed so much. It was right out in the middle of apricot orchards and a creek right along side of it, big oak trees and everything. It was pretty nice. But money was a lot different than it is now.

Swent: So you were driving across to Livermore every day from Los Altos?

Wilder: Oh, yes. Back and forth up--well, Livermore was a piece of cake. From Livermore up to the top of the mountain took about an hour.

Swent: That was a long way.

Wilder: Oh, yes.

Swent: What bridge was there then? Dumbarton?

Wilder: No, from Los Altos I'd go down Mountain View, Alviso Road.

Swent: Around the Bay.

Wilder: Yes, see, because I didn't live in San Francisco; when I moved to Los Altos is when I was mining up there. And so I'd go to Mountain View, Alviso Road, but there was no freeway there, then. We'd go the old Oakland Highway and then up Warm Springs Road, you turned off. A little windy, little road. All little windy roads. It was not some big easy drive. It was a slow one where you kept your eyes open because there were a lot of wrecks on that road, people goof off and run off the road.

Swent: What were you driving?

Wilder: Then I was driving this Diamond T because when I would go up there, I would make sure I had a load to come home so I wasn't driving for nothing.

Swent: So you were driving your truck over this.

Wilder: Oh, yes. That was a three-axle dump truck, it was a pretty new dump truck and good transportation but the biggest day I came back we had about fifteen tons. At that time, we were getting $135 a ton and we'd talk of it like you do on mercury in pounds per ton instead of like ounces in gold or fractions of ounces on the chrome-to-gold ratio, four to one, five to one, six to one. That was a common way of miners who are talking about it. You know, you'd run stuff that would run three to one, four to one, six to one, something like that.

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Wilder: We would have $135 for concentrates and have mostly twenty dollars a ton for ore. That's $300 a load, which isn't too bad. Of course, I had to pay the milling on the end of it.

Swent: They sampled each truckload as it came in?

Wilder: No, we'd put it in a pile and it would come off of the recovered amount, was what it would if we were selling it. But we weren't selling it. They were milling it on a percentage.

Swent: It was toll milling. I see.

Wilder: It was ground and tabled over jigs on tables; a regular mill. Palo Alto Mining did that, up until, oh, I think '55.

Swent: You didn't have anything to do with selling the chrome.

Wilder: No, they handled it at that time.

Help from Many Good Friends

Swent: You just got it to the mill.

Wilder: I delivered it there and then the settlement check from the government came and we split it. I can't remember whether we split fifty-fifty or what we did do. It was something like that. Then, let's see, '54 was the year when things got really pretty tough. Fifty-three, fifty-four. That's when the ore got wet and we couldn't get it through. Pretty desperate. So I said, boy, I'm just going to take the truck and start working. I've got to get money and I'm not going to get it sitting here wringing my hands. So I got out and started working. You know, it was kind of neat. Guys in the business. Everybody was helping me like you wouldn't believe.

One was L.C. Smith, a pretty good person. I thought he was good. And his brother, George. And L.C. was a contractor down there in San Mateo, pretty good-size contractor. I was, boy, desperate. I mean, I wanted to work in the worst way. Boy, they kept me working. Everybody would steer jobs to me like nobody's business. So I kept busy.

Then it got just real slow because there just wasn't any work going. I saw a thing in the paper where a piece of property up in Redwood City, Stulstaft Park. It wasn't a park then, but it was Mud Lake, they called it. It was Farm Hills Ranch up there. They discovered this mercury deposit up there. That was Dick Dinely and Hal Pigott, who was an old mining fellow.

So I went up there. I just had to see it. I wanted to see somebody doing something in the mining yet, and I had a day or two off there. So I walked in. It was mile or so, two miles. I walked in and by gosh they had a loader working there doing some exploration. So I stood around and finally, gee, you know. They said, "Do you know anything about this?"

I said, "Yes, that's what I've been doing, is mining, for a couple of years now," because finally that--see, I had the contract working for Palo Alto Mining. And that's when I had all the trouble. That's right. Then it goes from there.

Then I went to Emerald Hill or this Emerald Lake up there, that area. That was one in Redwood City. So they asked me if I knew anything about it. I said, "Gee, that's business."

He said, "Well, have you got any equipment?"

I said, "I've got a shovel and a loader and trucks and that."

And they said, "Mmm. We'd like to talk to you some more."

So I said, "Gee, that's good."

Hauling Ore from the Emerald Lake Mercury Mine in Redwood City to the Geysers

Wilder: They called me that night and said, "What do you think about this? What kind of a number can you give us in hauling up here?" We hauled up here to the geysers, to Dr. Buckman's.

Swent: Oh, really?

Wilder: You know Dr. Buckman?

Swent: No, I've heard the name.

Wilder: Yes, Buckman Chemical Company. They said--

Swent: From Redwood City all the way up here?

Wilder: Yes.

Swent: That's a long--

Wilder: "What kind of a number can you give us on delivering up there at the mill with a minimum of 120 tons a day?" I think it was. Yes, it was 120 tons a day.

So I said, "Jeez, I don't know." That night, I said, "Well, we'll take a ride." So we [Betty and I] took Linda and Billy and we went for ride. We drove up there. We left Los Altos and drove up here on the back road up through Mercuryville Divide and up there drove a little windy road and steep grades and everything up to the plant and then came back on down. I checked time and mileage. I got back the next morning about eight o'clock in the morning. Long drive. I was just really tired, you know. I hadn't been to sleep for a day or a day and a half.

We got back down and I came up with a number on it and gave him that. He said, "Fine, that's it. You got a job. Let's start mining before we do anything."

And I said, "Well, we have some of the stuff we could mill."

He said, "The stuff that goes up there has to be pretty high grade. But we have a lot of stuff, maybe, that won't make that."

So I said, "Gee, Palo Alto Mining was always good to me." So I said, "Maybe they could mill it and upgrade it." So we did push them together. It didn't work out. They did run a lot of stuff and we hauled from Redwood City to Palo Alto Mining, the same mill down on Hillyer Avenue but the losses on cinnabar was terrible. I mean, it doesn't mill nicely. You have problems with it and gravity concentration.

So anyhow, that didn't work out but we hauled up here to Buckman's for quite a while, I think about nine, ten months. It was a tough haul and we broke the bridge [?] and oh, God, we had a pretty tough time, I know. We'd have to leave at three in the morning so that they could pull that grade before the heat of the day. When the road got hot, the road started going downhill. Instead of the truck going up, the road would go down.

Swent: That was up here in Lake County?

Wilder: Yes, that Mercuryville Divide, that's a steep grade. And some of the trucks would have to hook together; one truck wouldn't have

enough power to pull the grade. So we'd chain them together and the one with low enough gears and enough power would pull the other ones, see? But they would be trying to spin tires with a full load. And what happened, is the pavement would start moving down.

Swent: Oh, my!

Wilder: Yes, it was a pretty tough run. It was a rough haul. But we did that for a long time and everybody made money on it. It had so much mercury you could not believe it. That thing was a heck of a mercury mine, that one in Redwood City, beautiful mine. Easy mining and some fantastically good ore. It's still good ore there. But mercury is an outcast in the mining industry right now, you know.

Swent: What were they using it for then?

Wilder: Oh, for mildew proofing for paints, for atomic plants. It was a heat exchanger on atomic subs. Gee, there's just so many uses. Mercury fulminate--they were still using that for a blasting cap. I'm trying to think of some of the other ones. There were all kinds of uses. Oh, the chloralkalide plants were making the detergents and stuff, chlorine compounds. It was used in them. The demand was good and the price was up. So we kept busy on that. Let's see, that must have been '55 when we ran up here.

Then we had that big flood in '55. Oh, a real big flood when Palo Alto was inundated and Los Altos. Big-time flood. That's when Miranda and a whole bunch of them going into Ferndale went out. They lost their whole town. Boy, the loss of life was tremendous on it. It went through Santa Cruz right down the main street. There were some people who headed out--they never did ever find the cars or nothing, went out to sea. That was pretty spectacular. We had equipment then.

I remember, I had a little New Year's party and I had quite a few guys working then, on this mining, with the trucks and everything. So we had a little party. But it was changing in shifts because they were all working on this flood control thing like that San Francisquito Creek in Palo Alto. They were down clearing that out. It had trees and mud and stuff in there. So they were working twenty-four hours a day, Saturday, Sunday, New Year's, didn't make any difference because it was a pretty important flood, you know. Oh, you were up all day and all night. I mean, you'd sleep in little two-hour snatches, and then get up and do something else.

Fifty-five was when that flood was; then in '56 we leased a plant out here at Guerneville, Sonoma Quick. Clarence Reed turned out to be just a real dear friend. He had emphysema. He finally died from that, from smoking. But Clarence was more help, I think, in the mining business and I think that that's pretty good.

Technical Advice from Friendly Mercury Experts

Wilder: Hyde Lewis, who was the manager in New Idria, he would take time to teach me stuff and show me things and explain how and have his millwrights and everybody explain how to do certain things and why they did them, you know. It was pretty good. Ben Bailey was another one that is still around. And Clarence Reed. See, there were so many guys, I think, that helped me. I couldn't believe it. Gordon Gould was another one. He was a helpful guy. And Mike Fopp. After Gordon died, Mike took over the outfit. Gordon Gould and I think it's Gordon Gould, Incorporated or something.

Swent: I thought Gould bought mercury.

Wilder: Not really. He designed plants and stuff. And Grace Emmons at Quicksilver Products bought mercury.

Challenge Mining Company: Farm Hills Estates, Redwood City

Swent: When you were working for this Emerald Lake mine in Redwood City--

Wilder: Oh, that was Andy Oddstadt, by the way. Farm Hills Estates was the property. It started out as a mine. Andy owned the land. It was a subdivision he was planning. But Hal Pigott and Dinely talked to him and said, "Well, give us a chance. We can show you a little bit. Can we lease it?"

He said, "Oh, mining is so much baloney."

So they made some deal that they paid him ten dollars a ton or something. And wow! The first week, we took 186 flasks out of there just like that; nothing to it. And Andy Oddstadt about died because at that time it was 330 dollars a flask. So we didn't do bad, see.

He went, "What am I doing here?" Then he came and talked to me. "Well, this guy didn't tell me it was going to be this good."

So then he went back and renegotiated this thing. And then Andy was a partner in it. I think he ultimately bought everybody out; paid them off some way on this. I don't know how that worked. I had nothing to do with it.

I stayed there. As a matter of fact, I was there all the time. I did the mining there for them and then when Andy and them split up, kind of, I stayed there and still did the mining. And then they built the plant out at the Port of Redwood City. See, that was a lot of mud flats with marsh or something where you couldn't get on it. It was high enough in dry weather but if the tide came in, you're in trouble. So they said, "Fine. You can put the plant here." It's where they used to have a big lumber yard. So we put the plant there. Then the calcines went into making this fill area inside. We made a sea wall.

That belonged to Andy Oddstadt. They call it Challenge Mining Company, as a matter of fact. It was the name for it at that time, Challenge Mining, because he said, "Boy, this is a challenge." And so I stayed with him on that and then they started this subdivision. And he said, "Bill, why don't you do the grading on this?"

I said, "I don't know anything about grading on subdivisions."

"You'll learn."

I said, "Well, I don't even have any idea what kind of numbers to come up with."

Well, they said, "We'll give you some pointers."

So they did. And they were terrible. I think I took all the money from the mining and put it into the subdivision. This is backwards. You know, normally, everybody says, "Take the money from the subdivision and lose it on a mine." Well, I was making it on the mine and losing it on the subdivision, the dirt work.

So anyhow, I told them, this is terrible. I was having some problems too with some of the--I was kind of a new kid on the block there and this company had a lot of guys there that had friends that had been doing other subdivisions and they were supposed to be in there. And Andy and Cy Pelitz said, "No, we want you to do it because we know there's no under the table deals or anything--straight arrow." So I did stay on that way.

And I finally went and told them, gee, I can't. This is getting me down. I'm lying awake nights trying to figure how I'm

going to come out of this thing because if I'm losing ten dollars on a job and I got 5,000 jobs, this is not good. This is more money than I'll make in my lifetime. And I said, "I'll stay on, no problem. I'll stay on until you can find somebody else to do this. But I'd like to get out of it."

We jumped in a car and we drove around and looked the subdivision over and looked at my guys working. So they looked it over and we just kind of bumbled around and I don't know what the heck. I don't have much to offer or anything but I said, "All I want to do is just get out of this so that I don't have this terrible headache all the time."

So they said, "Well, listen, what does it take to keep you?"

I says, "I don't know. I just want to get out of here. Because I don't know how to figure these numbers, the jobs. I don't have the experience on that. I know how to do the work but I don't know how to calculate the things yet."

They said, "To do this, then, why don't you just stay on. Give us a list of what your rates are."

So I said, "Well, I'll give you a cheaper rate, then, if you want to do that. And if everything takes more time than I'm anticipating, at least I got my labor covered and the fuel bills, and most of the equipment I own pretty well. There should be something for maintenance."

So they said, "No, no problem on that. You should make a little money." So they did. And I stayed on and they were so good to me. They were good people.

Swent: Isn't that nice.

Wilder: Yes. I thought they were great people because I had a lot of respect for them, really. Then they changed from Challenge Mining Company, when the price of mercury went down and we wound up pretty well. Then I took the job taking the plant down at Redwood City and took a contract to haul it down to Torreon in Mexico. So that worked out pretty good. That was another--well, a challenge, kind of. Something new. [laughs]

Swent: Was this a mercury plant?

Wilder: Yes, that was a Herschoff furnace that went down to Torreon. Mercurio del Norte. A guy named Nugent out of Texas bought it. Yes, Jack Ives was his son-in-law. That's right. Yes, it comes back to me. I've still got a good memory on these names.

Swent: Yes, you do.

Wilder: Yes. I can't remember what happened yesterday but what happened forty years ago. [laughter] But Oddstadt was a good friend. He got killed. Some guy got on the freeway backwards, drove up an off ramp, and hit Andy head on and killed him down in Fresno. But the company became Challenge Contracting, which did that North Star up there, built by them. Aluminum Company of America, Alcoa, bought Challenge after. And that just led to a whole bunch of funny little things. Then that subdivision slowed way down. They went into building, you know, the big production was over then. That must have been about '57. So I had a couple of guys working up there all the time, tractors and some guys. And that helped pay the bills. But I had all these other guys.

Swent: Up at North Star, you mean?

Wilder: No, here in Farm Hills. We stayed there until the '60s. It must have been about '56-'57 that that slowed way down, that the big subdivisions got over it and you know, nice houses, but a lot of them. We were doing six a day on 1700-square-foot houses. There was a lot of work, on hills, you know. So you've got to bench lots and do all this. It was a lot of work.

Back to Chrome Mining and a Heartbreaking Fall in the Price

Wilder: But anyhow, what the heck did I do? Oh, then things were pretty quiet in construction. So I took the guys. I said, "Well, we've got to find something." Nobody wants to go on unemployment. These are workers that I got. So I said, "Well, let's do this, then." The chrome claims. We still had chrome, you know, and the claims up there.

So we leased a mill from Palo Alto Mining and went up there. We ran that first year for--just had about a month or two left and it seemed like that we got some ore out and ran the mill and got ourselves figured out so we knew what we were doing a little bit.

So we ran that mill and we could see where if we can increase the production, we'll do pretty good. And these are all partners, now. I brought all the workers. This is the thing. I put all the dough that I can--don't have a lot of dough. But what we have in equipment--I put all the equipment up and everything and try and make sure that everybody's got enough money to eat on so that we keep busy. So we did. We went up there and did a little bit good.

Then we went up and spent time, we were going to get ready for the big push. So we stripped a big chunk off of the ore body, got all the dirt off it so it was ready to go. And we did all this work on the mill, we just about doubled the production of the mill. Then the price went from a 135 dollars down to 28 in one day.

Swent: Oh!

Wilder: This was a heart breaker for everybody, myself included. So we just picked up our marbles and left. There was no way we could do that one. Can't win on that.

Swent: When was that?

Wilder: That must have been about the end of '57-'58. Then those funny things. This Bob Garrow was with Oddstadt. He was a purchasing agent. We were pretty good friends. He knew pretty well what I could do and what I couldn't do. I think they had a lot of faith in me. So he went with the National Association of Home Builders back in Washington. Andy had done some things, made a demonstration house and gave it to the Russians. If you go back, you'll see some newspaper articles where he did this--built a house up in--not Lindenmar--someplace up that way in South City and put up the house and showed the Russians. Then they knocked it down and shipped it to Russia as a gift.

Anyhow, Bob Garrow came back from there and went to work for an outfit called Nieman-Barnhart-Chase, NBC in San Jose. I got a call to come down. And I said, "Gee, Bob. How are you?" We hadn't seen each other for years, you know, three, four years or something. Two years.

An Ingenious Solution to a Contractor's Problem in San Jose

Wilder: So he said, "Well, we got some problems and I thought maybe you could figure a way out of it for us."

They had some jobs that the contractors had bid and they'd used a contractor's numbers going into it for schools and stuff. The guy got in and found out he'd made a terrible mistake and he walked out on them. You know, that leaves NBC with a school to build with about half the dirt work, the money for about half the dirt work.

So I said, "Wow."

I went out and I did some figuring on this thing. It was kind of tough. And I came up with a wrinkle that saved the day. And boy, they really thought that was pretty smart. This is, sounds egotistical, but what it was is that this contract called for the school had to be built on engineered fill, which is like gravel or something. It couldn't be on topsoil, see. It was a slab. They'd pour a slab. Then there was a running field, running track and all this is part of the thing. That was Metzler School down in San Jose.

So anyhow, I fooled around and I don't know what I did. I got this idea from something. Hey, this is a valley. There's got to be some gravel down here. So I took the loader and made a cut and I got down about four feet, five feet and boy, I hit the most beautiful gravel for engineered fill, sand and gravel. Ah, wait a minute. Here we've got to strip all this thing off and we're going to have this pile of stripping to haul away. Not if we do this right.

So we go in, strip all the topsoil off of it, strip off the building site where the building is going and we've got to put in two or three feet of gravel for the whole building slab. We'd take scrapers, go in and take the gravel out underneath the top, take the topsoil off, take the gravel off, put it in the hole over here where the building's going and that gives us our engineered fill. And we took the gravel and the strippings that we'd taken off from where the building was going, put them down there, put the topsoil back on and grade it off. We had the permission of the school board because now we've got topsoil. Instead of two or three feet of topsoil we've got six, eight feet of topsoil, ten feet of topsoil. And the building was sitting on three or four feet of good engineered fill.

And it amounted to a bunch of money because NBC came out of it and we split the thing. I said, "Well, anything that I can save above the budget we split. And we split the thing. I did the work and everything, got paid for everything there and we split the difference. We came in under the bid, ooh, something like $25,000 or something. So it was a big chunk. They said, "Fine, you're entitled to half of this as a bonus."

Swent: Wonderful.

Wilder: It was great. I mean, everybody working on the job got a piece of that one. So it was good. It was a real good thing. They said, "Gee, this is pretty neat." So then they had another one that this guy bid, too, that walked out on them. And we did that one. We saved their bacon on that one. So then they thought, gee, this

is good. This guy is pulling all these things out of the hat. But it took a lot of thinking, all the time, you know.

Swent: Oh, yes. A lot of experience.

Wilder: We did the YMCA in San Jose and that was one, too. That was the old Hart mansion. You know the Hart family that the boy was kidnapped. It was the last lynching in California. The kidnappers kidnapped the Hart's son and murdered him after they received their payment and they didn't turn the kid loose. They killed him. But the people were so upset about this they caught the kidnappers. They hung them in St. James Square down there. It was the last lynching in San Jose. It was the last lynching I know of in California. That was in the thirties. It was a big thing because people really were upset about it. The Hart family was pretty prominent and pretty popular. They were looked up to. This was really a low blow, these guys doing this.

This happened back in the thirties and a friend of mine, Al Kaiser said, "Holy smokes." It made such an impact in San Jose they didn't even give out parking tickets. Nobody would even park illegal after that. No cheating, no nothing. Everybody was law-abiding like you wouldn't believe. [laughs]

But anyhow, we did that clearing it out. The house had been razed. But we did a bunch of funny little things. Sold firewood, sold everything that we could sell to help offset the cost of the job. And they picked up a pretty good portion. As a matter of fact, it was good enough that they offered to--"Why don't you bring your outfit in? We'd like to buy you out and bring you into the company."

I thought about it. That was pretty flattering. To me, it was, anyhow. I'm still a minor mechanic. So that was pretty good but I didn't. I said, "No, I better not." I'm an independent basically, you know.

Well, I sold coffee, and repaired coffee equipment and learned to roast. I was going to buy a partnership in the coffee company. The company is still going. It's Freed, Teller & Freed down in San Francisco. They're still down there. They have a store down there in that Embarcadero Center. But the main store was out on Polk Street, some little side street there. And Harry Doherty was a guy from Lake County, was the owner of it. And it was an interesting thing. That's another thing. Harry was general manager for Farmer Brothers.

Problems Getting Ahead in the Construction Business

Swent: So you decided not to stay in the construction business?

Wilder: Well, I still was doing construction, yes. I just got so tired of bum debts, stuff like--everything was--you're getting different kind of people, maybe. I'm used to, like, McKeon. We did a big subdivision for him. That was started in '58, about the time that I was doing this work for NBC, for Nieman, Bornhart & Chase. Then George McKeon got a hold of me and we went up and did St. Francis Heights in Colma. It was a big one. It was, I think, around 3600 homes. We did all the lot benching and grading and lawns and concrete and flatwork--we did all the grading work there. That was a good job. McKeon is respectable. People pay their bills so that you don't do all the work, pay all your men, pay all the materials and then the guy says, "I don't have anything. Sue me."

I did run into that more and more. So finally, I just was fed up with the thing. So I got into just renting equipment. Don't have any labor because you get stuck by that, burned, put in all the streets, do the paving and all this and then the guy says, "How about if I give you an apartment over in Richmond or something?"

Well, I go down there to the apartment and oh my God, its's a bunch of headhunters and they don't look at me with a friendly look, you know. I'm lucky I didn't get killed in some of these because I'm not too bashful. So I'd go in. "Gee, I'd like to look at the apartment, see what I'm getting into here." Boy, you get some pretty good opposition, you know. It was where the BART train goes through Richmond there. It was right under there. I should have taken it but--oh, no. I shouldn't have. [laughs] It's better I didn't. So then I came up to the mine.

IV PROSPECTING FOR A MERCURY MINE##

Doing the Basic Research

Swent: You were just saying how you came up to the Manhattan Mine; you got burned on some of your construction deals.

Wilder: Yes, it had been a long time and I was interested in the mercury but I hadn't ever really done anything but I could see it was better than the chromite because there was at least a market for it.

Swent: Did you still have any equipment?

Wilder: Oh, had all the equipment. I never got out of the construction equipment. I went into rentals. We did, like, excavation up at Harold's Club in Reno. Oh, gosh, had stuff at Diamond Heights, had equipment up there.

Swent: You had quite a lot of equipment by then.

Wilder: Yes, it was a pretty good bunch of equipment as a matter of fact. And we did repairs on our own equipment and it worked out pretty good.

Swent: Did you have employees?

Wilder: I had myself and a couple employees.

Swent: You still had some that you were responsible for.

Wilder: Yes, a couple, and had Billy, who is my oldest boy. Then he went into the Marine Corps. That was when Vietnam started. Let's see. Then, how did that work? About that time I was looking at mercury and I couldn't really find anything that I thought was good. I'd worked at Guadalupe, some, with a loader and a shovel. That was

tribute, working on a percentage. They run this stuff. That was Palo Alto Mining again; it had the Guadalupe. And it was not, I didn't think, a good go. I'd rather do something on my own instead of having this thing where you're kind of in a second position all the time.

Swent: You said the New Idria was still going.

Wilder: Oh, New Idria was going great guns.

Swent: You'd been down there and talked to them.

Wilder: Oh, yes. Yes, I talked to them. I used to go prospecting down there. As a matter of fact, before we pulled the plant down in Redwood City and it was sold to this Mercurio del Norte in Torreon. Before we did that, we looked to move that plant to another mine, which would have been a pretty smart idea if we would have done that and found a suitable mine.

So in the meantime, I was out hustling, trying to find some mine that looked like it was feasible to put the plant in to get production. So my first guess was up in Panoche Valley and down by New Idria. So we went through all that, went through every little old mine that had been ever been recorded, prospects and stuff. Did have the Hillsdale and the Chaboya leased, which was the Hillsdale in San Jose. I had that leased from old man Azevedo. He had American Dairy Ranchers and I leased a mine there and we ran that up to Redwood City for a while. The dumps and stuff. But it was no good. It was nip and tuck. You just about come out even, you know. The amount of money you put in, you got just about that amount back. You never could get ahead.

Swent: You said you were looking these up. Where were you looking them up?

Wilder: Oh, in books right there. All them old books and stuff.

Swent: Where did you get those?

Wilder: Most of the time, I'd buy them from the State, you know, from the state library up there. Yes, I'd buy a lot of them. I wonder how I did get a lot of them. I guess it was just buying the books. I'd go and buy some of the state bulletins and I'd research them. Oh, I know. I got pretty good at researching because there was a little period of time in there around '56 that the guys from Oddstadt's, too, from Challenge, and myself, we formed a little partnership and we went up to Monitor Pass, the Lord Chalmers mine, the Kurtz, and Morning Star.

A Development Job for Alpine Eureka Mining Company

Wilder: Lorraine Alvicci was the credit manager for the Diamond-T, for Engs Motor Truck Company, which was Ed Engs. I think he was on the board of directors of the Bank of California, too. She got a hold of me. She had a guy that had some property up there at Monitor Pass. They called it Alpine Eureka Mining Company. They got a hold of me to see what the heck, if I was interested in this thing. It was a real complex ore. It was copper ore and enargite and gold-silver, lot of arsenic in it. And they had a little bit of everything in it.

But anyhow, that mine--I went up and looked at it a couple of times. Then I took this crew, some of my workers that were still in this kind of a partnership deal and some people from Challenge Mining or Oddstadt Homes. We went up there and it was hilarious. But we did develop some stuff for drilling, dumps and stuff. We spent a little time on the thing and it was hilarious because we all died laughing. It was so disorganized.

You know, some of these things, you design it here, then you get up there and it doesn't work. Like we had an auger sampling thing and you couldn't get equipment around because it was so steep and small. So it was all backpack stuff to drill a pile and come up with some samples. I designed this and what a goof I made of that. I made it so that if a guy was ten foot tall he'd have no problem getting started. But there's nobody ten foot tall. [laughter] So we put one guy on another guy's shoulders and get started. It was hilarious as a matter of fact.

But we got our job done. It was right when a snowstorm was coming in like you wouldn't believe and we wanted to get these samples out. We drove for two days, night and day just about. We got them and then we got a write-up in the Reno paper, how organized we were. [laughter] It was actually that fun. That was kind of a fun thing.

Swent: What kind of drilling were you doing?

Wilder: Just plain auger sampling. But we were auger sampling, I think, down to about fifteen, twenty feet, in dumps so we'd get an idea of what gold content we had. At that time, there was a smelter in El Paso we could ship it to but there was a railroad siding in Carson City. So we'd have to haul from the mine up the Carson Road, railroad car, ship it to El Paso, then paid--who the devil owned that mill down there that would do the recovery?

Swent: Was it Asarco?

Wilder: Yes, it was; the same outfit that used to have Selby. So anyhow, put all the numbers together and we had a pretty good number cruncher. This Chuck Olivia was sharp on numbers. We did do a lot of figuring on it. It came out we might make a little bit. You might make a dollar a ton or you could lose a dollar a ton. So there was no incentive. So we scrapped that project but before we did this, we did so much research at Stanford. Stanford has a good library on that. So we researched this mining district up there. It's Monitor Pass, Mogul, the town of Mogul and Hay Press Flat; all those mines. We knew them pretty good up there. We did a lot of research on it.

Swent: Were these mercury mines?

Wilder: No, there was a little mercury mine there. There were the gold mines; it was the English answer to Virginia City, basically. It was English money that went in there. They used to ship the ore. Back in the old days, they shipped it as ballast over to Swansea, Wales. And I said, "Wow, if they can haul it from Monitor Pass down here to the bay and put it on a ship and then haul it to Wales and then smelt it, wow, this has got to be some pretty good ore." Well, it was some pretty good ore. But of course, the ships were running back empty so they were hauling the ore back pretty cheap. But you still couldn't get it from the mine down to the water for nothing. There had to be some money involved. So that worked pretty good. We scrapped that project, though.

But then, that still left me with this thing, we've got to get something going. So we went back in on the chrome for a little bit. That's when that folded it, from a hundred and thirty-five to twenty-eight dollars. Then we did this drilling up here. Let's see. Then I think I started fooling around. Oh, I know what it was. I looked and looked and looked and mercury was down all the time. It never got up.

Looking at the Stayton District near Hollister

Wilder: Then all of a sudden, mercury started coming up. Let's see, in 1955 was around $333 for mercury. It must have been '63-'64 it went up like a shot. Mercury all of a sudden was up there at four or five hundred dollars. I started looking. Then I said, "This is the place to go." Go where the price is good. So I started looking and I came in to one that was interesting and nobody knew anything about it. That was the Stayton District.

Swent: How were you looking? Going out there?

Wilder: No, looking in books and coming up with things where if, say, in 1906 or 1910 it was good or in 1880 there were some good reports on this thing, had some values and the chance to make a mine. Then all of a sudden it disappears from the records. You don't see anything. Hmm. That's worthwhile looking at. So I went down and looked at this one. It was the Gypsy, the Bluewing, Coolwater, a bunch of claims that all belonged to Knox.

Swent: Where were they?

Wilder: They were mercury mines.

Swent: Where?

Wilder: It's the Stayton District, the district out of Hollister, Henrietta Peak. It's an antimony district, too. So anyhow, this was pretty good. I looked at them, anyhow, and I found one that I said, "Hey, this could turn into a good mine." It's funny. This goes a little further. I'll go back and these names pop up again with Homestake.

So anyhow, Jeffrey was just a little guy. That's my second son. And I had Jeffrey with me and Kathy Cushingham, Knox's daughter, and Virginia Butler. And Kathy's son was about Jeffrey's age. I went down there prospecting and breaking rocks and I walked all day there. Jeffrey was busy with Kathy's son. They had some kind of a little motor scooter or something and oh, they just had a ball. I mean, it was good. That's still a long ride, though, from Los Altos. It's a couple of hours, two or three hours up there. It was up on the top of this Henrietta Peak.

But anyhow, I looked at that and I went back and looked at it. The more I studied it the more it looked good to me, broke rock and looked at what the potential could be. I said it could be good. So then winter came on where I can't get back in. But I made up my mind then. Hey, that's where I want to go. Everybody's going everywhere else and nobody even looked at this.

Swent: And this was owned by Knox's daughter.

Wilder: Yes, see, he just died. Raynor Knox, son of Richard F. Knox, was the one who owned this up here, and then Raynor owned that also, see. The brains in the outfit was Richard F., the old man. I haven't seen anybody better today. Geologists, ouija boards, anything. You just look at this mine here, how our baseline is that Homestake set up there. Then look at Knox's baseline with the way the claims were located. Knox's is closer than Homestake's. It is now. It's closer. And they didn't have

drills. When he came out here there was no air drills. Dynamite hadn't been invented yet. How'd this guy do it, you know?

Well, I said, "There's got to be somebody to come put the thought in your mind from up above that says--" I'm not religious but I know that there's more to this life than you'd be led to believe if you'd listen to people, see. But anyhow, I went up there after the winter was over as soon as it got where I could get in there again.

And then I talked to Kathy Cushingham. She was a nice lady and so was her husband, nice guy. They said, "Ah, God. We just leased that thing last week to an outfit over in Tracy."

I went, "Oh, God." I mean, here I'd planned for five months or four months, from the time I got out of there, I had really done everything I could to do some figuring on this thing. Boy, that was a shock to me. So I said, "Well, that's the end of that tune."

Introduction to the Manhattan Mine in Lake County

Wilder: They said, "We've got another one up by Lake County. Maybe you'd be interested in that."

I said, "What's the name of that?"

"It's the Manhattan or Lake Mines."

I said, "I've never heard of them," and I thought I knew pretty good now. I'm just reading all the time and looking all over on mercury mines. I really did. I thought I knew every one around. So I said, "Hmm, Manhattan." I went and started researching. And by God, yes, it's there. But nobody paid any attention to it because it had been inactive since 1906. It was still thirteenth in the country in production and it hadn't been run since 1906, or 1905 really. It hadn't been run. It was thirteenth in production and we're talking about things going through World War I and World War II and up to, say, '65. I went, "Holy smokes."

I came up and looked at it and I went, "Uh-oh, wow." This has got to be that San Quentin--that's what it was called. Like the penitentiary. And it looked tough. Wow, the hardest rock I've ever seen. I looked and I could not find enough ore to fill

my tooth with. So I said, "Holy smokes." This has got to be a big scam. It must have been. Well, it was too much work. A lot of work had been done there. It was a pretty big mine. There was no doubt about it. It was not some little prospect; it was a mine. I didn't have any doubt about that because they had a store and they had two or three hundred people. So, more research. What the devil were they running?

Came back up and it was one of those things--when you think you know all the answers, that's when you really begin to realize how little you know. I came back and looked at it. After I came back about the fourth time--I'd spend the weekend breaking rocks and looking at it--I began to get a pattern of how this thing was occurring and then I could forecast, gee, this should be in this. Break it and sure enough, you'd find some cinnabar.

It was all kind of a little bit different, not like Knoxville. It was entirely different, just like night and day, that far apart. This is the only one I've ever seen like it. So then I started looking at it and I saw the size of the dumps and panned the dumps. Jeez, they panned beautiful. I said, "Hmmm." Then we said, "Well, we'll come up." And with the old auger system, we modified the same auger that I had up on the Monitor Pass.

And so we came up here and augered this thing. Oh, wow, we took something. I still have all the reports. We set up our own lab for running assays. We did our own assaying on it and we ran something like, I think, five, six hundred samples on dumps. We came up with enough values from the dumps to justify going ahead with the operation, building a mill and concentrating; there was definitely enough value on the dumps. Now, if the dumps were that good, the mine should be better, you know, especially where it wasn't shut down because it ran out of ore. It was shut down because there's some legal problems. So we went ahead and negotiated a lease.

V ONE SHOT MINING COMPANY

Partnership with the Matsumoto Brothers

Swent: Who is "we"?

Wilder: That's Matsumoto brothers. In the meantime, there's an outfit called T&J Garage. The Matsumoto brothers, they're Japanese guys down in San Jose, in Sunnyvale. And they're pretty good friends. Heck, we were pretty close from a lot of things. I'd advised them at some things and they'd helped me on a lot of stuff, too. So it was a pretty good relationship, actually.

When I got so disgusted with construction, I said, "I just don't want anything to do with this anymore," one of the brothers, Roy, was running the shop over there. They had a pretty big shop, had about thirty-five mechanics, a truck shop, you know. He's set up with this thing to the skies. I said, "Hey, I'm fed up with this." So we switched places. He went over to run the construction end for me and I went over and ran the shop for him. I was there for a year. I was a shop manager for T&J Garage and MIW, Matsumoto Iron Works in Sunnyvale, trucking equipment. It worked out pretty good. We both got a breather, like a vacation, you know, to get a new look at life. So that worked out pretty good.

And one of the brothers, Joe, ended up, was kind of my partner. We were pretty good friends. But Joe was an accident--he could walk down the street and just trail disaster behind him. He just was one of those people. They'd buy a new roll and this has a big sign, "Quarter-inch maximum capacity to roll," you know, make a pipe or something--he puts a three-eighths in there and bam! Breaks the thing. And the other brothers are about ready to kill Joe. Everything he touches he breaks, you know. So they're yelling at him in Japanese.

He's the oldest brother, see. And by tradition, he should be running the outfit but this is not the guy to run things because he's not a business man. He's not too sharp in that stuff. But he was a nice guy, though. And we were good friends. So the other brothers are hollering at him and Tom was running the outfit.

So anyhow, Joe disappears. And his wife doesn't even know where he is. He's just gone. They had a big fight and he left. In the meantime, one of the brothers had committed suicide. Then Tom talked to me and he said, "Ah, jeez, my mother's a nervous wreck, you know. Joe was all upset when we yelled at him. He disappeared; Milly doesn't know where he is." That's his wife. Finally they got a call from Los Angeles. He was down there back where they were before the war. He was kind of, you know, gathering his thoughts, I guess.

I've been talking. "Hey, I'm going to mine and I'm going to do this and this and this."

They said, "Hey, we'd like to come in with you on that. Could you take Joe? If you could take Joe with you, we'd get along fine and Joe would be--you're the only one he really will work with, see."

I said, "Yeah, I don't have any problem with Joe. He works good." We do work good together. We did.

So I said, "Okay, come in. To start out we're going to be fifty-fifty." And in the meantime, I had some personal problems. Betty and I had split it up. So I said, "I don't need a half of this thing. You know, I'll take twenty-five. There's a whole bunch of you and there's only one of me." So I take twenty-five percent.

It worked out that's the way this went. Joe came in with me on it and we worked like dogs but we worked good together. We went up and got those furnaces, came out of Mt. Hamilton. I had two furnaces; we only set up one of them. But that furnace came out of Red Mountain. It was up there in back of Mt. Hamilton. There was Kaiser and Food Machinery had a magnesite mine up there. I remembered those furnaces from back in the chrome days. That was over the mountain from us where the chrome mine was.

Swent: There was no furnace left here?

Wilder: Oh, no. No, no. We built that plant up there. That was a pretty big plant that we built. Gordon Gould designed the plant and then

we built it and then we found all the mistakes in it [laughs] and rebuilt it.

Swent: When I was reading, they said it was a Knox-Osborn furnace.

Wilder: Oh, that's the old furnaces. That's going back to the 1800s.

Swent: So there was a Knox-Osborn furnace.

Wilder: Oh, yes. That's the old stone furnace, you see. The furnace plant that we built is the metal building. When we got there, all that was standing was the two furnaces. There was the Knox-Osborne coarse-ore and the Knox-Osborn fine-ore. And things had been raided, more or less. The stonework was still there. But we built the plant. It was a pretty nice plant. I think it was the best plant in the state, best plant in the country as far as I was concerned.

Trucking Furnaces from Mt. Hamilton to the Manhattan Mine

Swent: Tell about how you brought the one from Mt. Hamilton.

Wilder: [laughter] I took a ride up there and I remembered there was furnaces up there. I went up there and I talked to an old guy, Roy Williams. He was about eighty-five then. They had a little thing on this Arroyo del Mocho road out of Livermore that goes through eventually and hits Patterson Pass if you turn to the left or if you go to the right, you go over to Mt. Hamilton, to the observatory.

But out by that junction, there was a little store they called the Jot 'em Down Store. If you wanted something, you went in and told Roy, "Hey, when they're going down for supplies, will you have them pick up a bag of flour and this and this and this and this." I think his daughter ran down every two days or something and picked up stuff. And he had a few quarts of milk and some eggs and stuff--you know, you're out far enough that hey, the big drive into town is an hour and a half each way or an hour on a little windy wiggle-tail road type thing.

So anyhow, I stopped and saw Roy and we'd been friends for a long time, talking. I'd stop in there. And so, anyhow, I asked him about the furnace. He said, "God darn, there was guy that bought those furnaces--was going to cut them up. Just last week he was talking to me."

And I went, "Oh, my God. I had these in the back of my mind and I didn't bother doing anything."

I hot-footed it over there and the guy had started to cut them up. He had the torch and made a cut about that far in one of them. Then he found out they're all lined with brick. He was cutting through brick, magnesite brick, because those furnaces are used to running in--up to 3600--real high temperature. They were put in in the early twenties. They were put together up there, see, because there was no way you could get them up the road. They were sixty-five feet long. And they weighed about thirty-five tons apiece, thirty-seven tons apiece. It was some church group that bought them. This guy said, "Oh, boy."

Swent: What were they going to do with them?

Wilder: Well, I knew what I was going to do with them. I'm going to put those babies as quicksilver furnaces. It's this rotary kiln is what it is. So the guy said, "Gosh, if I could get $700 for these furnaces, you've got them."

So I said, "You got the 700." I gave him the $700. I think it was 700, 750, something like that. I think it was less than a thousand, anyhow.

And I bought those two furnaces and I said, "Now I own something." Of course, it's up in a place where there's an eight-ton bridge going that way and this other way, you got corners like that where the furnace would be--this half was over there and this half was on this side and there's no way you're going to get across the air, see. So I said, hmm. I looked out over, drove that and measured the radiuses. No way I can get it around there. It's worse than logs because it's longer and it's heavier.

Well, we went up there and I took the kids up there, took Billy and a bunch of friends of his. I had to unload them. The furnaces, when they shut them off, they were full of magnesite. So I said, "Well, what we'll do, kids, we'll get in there and you shovel it down, the other guy shovels it down and it falls out the end, see." [laughs] This is hilarious. That's another bad idea. So the first guy shovels. The guy down on the end shovels. That's not bad. The next guy shovels to him, dumps his load. This thing is like having a chimney. He's blowing this white powdered magnesite dust. The guy up on the end of the furnace is in a cloud. I mean, he can't even see. [laughs]

So we shoveled for about ten minutes. [laughs] I hear all this wailing, moaning, no good. And I said, "Well, let's try this." Nothing would work. You just could not get this stuff out

of the furnace and I bet there was six, eight, maybe ten tons of rock in there and we've got to get it out.

So I have a loader up there. We moved a loader in up there and it had a logging winch on the back. Took the cable off the logging winch and I found some old cable because this mine up there, that Red Mountain Mine, had a tipple and they had high lines going, cableways going out a mile or two in all directions. The mines were all up on the top of the mountains and they ran them down to the tipple with cable. It was a real intricate, neat operation there but it was falling down then.

But I found some old cable there and I said, "Hmm." I don't know where I got the idea but a hot flash got me, I guess. I took this cable and wound it around the furnace and then wound it around the logging winch, you know, and tied a knot on it because now we got a belt like, see. So I pulled the tractor up tight. And then I run the logging winch. And the cable walks all the way over to one side. Stop and run it backwards, all the way over to the other side. In the meantime, the kiln was going this way and going that way. In fact, it took about twenty-five minutes to get all the rocks out of the thing, clean as a whistle. It was perfect, see. So we did that in both of them.

Then I still have the truck. It's over here. I have a Sterling, a 1950 Sterling that I had for transport. A Sterling is a classic truck. That's why I keep it. It's a museum truck. It's better than the one that they got in the museum by a bunch. It's a better looking one and everything else. It's more authentic.

We had that Sterling and we got up there. We said, "Well, we'll load these. We'll make kind of a big ramp to load these furnaces down." We're up on the top of a mountain like that. And I got a little road. I made a road in so I could get the Sterling in down below them. But if this furnace gets going, it's over the Sterling and down into a canyon. You'll never get it back, see. So we were pretty careful.

Swent: You were planning to take two of them on one truck?

Wilder: No, you'd never get it. You only take one at a time. And it's a big load. It's a permit load; I had a permit for 102,000--108,000 pounds which is big-time. That's a big load. I think we were greater than that. No way of weighing it out there. So we get the biggest permit we can get and we know we're going to be close anyhow.

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Wilder: We got the furnaces and made some big planks and stuff and we jacked them up and took the rollers off of one side that the kiln runs in. Then we made like a bridge over to the trailer and put some cables on this thing so it couldn't get away and got on the other side and dug the loader in so it couldn't pull the loader down. And then we just got this thing started first with the jack and got up there on the downhill and then we just rolled it right across onto the trailer. I said, "Beautiful." Worked slick as a whistle.

We made one mistake. We made steel tracks to go on top of these big timbers and we used big channel irons. Well, that thing was so heavy, when it rolled over the channel irons they curled up. It was like a big roll. It turned them into big hoops.

Swent: Oh, my.

Wilder: So we said, "That's no good. We'll stay with the wood and forget the steel." But anyhow, we got that one on there. So that was good, chained it all down. I said, "Well, good. Now I've got to pull up this real steep mountain and right at the top I've got to make a left turn and go down the other side to get to a road."

I got up there with the Sterling. The only thing I neglected to think about was when I got up there, the front end can't come down because it's hooked onto the trailer. I mean, it's so steep, like this. The trailer's hanging down here and the truck is like that. The frame hits on the trailer so the front wheels of this fall out in the air and I can't steer. I go, "Whoop!" And I'm going to go off the other side so I said, "Oh, no good. Back up." So then we cut the frame off, right out in the field, just cut the back of the frame off so that now the truck can go down. I got up to the top and made the turn and got down. Beautiful.

So then we got down that road that goes out to Patterson, the Patterson Pass Road. I got down there and there's a bridge that said seven, eight tons. I was seventy tons. Boy, it was big time. Yes, we were about fifty, sixty tons. So I said, "Whoa." Got under it and looked at it. It looks good and sturdy and it's got plenty of timber under it. I don't know where they came up with this rating but I said, "No, that's good for a lot more than that."

And Gerbers lived out there. And Gerber said, "I think that'll stand a lot more." We looked at it. The most we could do was break it. It's a wooden bridge so we'd have to rebuild it. So that's that.

We just came on down and put the front axle on it real easy. It didn't even do nothing. Drove up and got the drivers, the back axles on the truck on there. Heck, it made it all the way across. Took it easy so it didn't bounce or anything. Then the trailer axle which was heavy--once you got the truck across, at least you're not going to fall down in this thing. Made it across; didn't even break a board in the bridge. I went all the way down and then it took me two days to get it into San Jose. Then I went back and got the second one. By then you got confidence, you know. And we got both those furnaces in there.

In the meantime we had Gordon Gould design this new plant utilizing those furnaces and all the stuff; we had a lot of stuff. Boy, we had a lot of equipment. What he did was to supply the engineering and we supplied all the equipment, motors and generators. I bought generators and rebuilt them myself because we didn't have any power up here so we had a good power plant. But we built big generators. That's something I knew; I'm good with my hands. I'm still working on engines. I never get away from it, you know.

It worked good. We got that furnace. Then we cut off the end and moved it and balanced the kiln better. He had new sections rolled for us.

Swent: How did you get it up here?

Wilder: Put it back on the Sterling and hauled it up.

Swent: Which road?

Wilder: I went up through Napa Valley on the Silverado Trail and then up Conn Dam to--let's see, by Nicholini Winery I came in at Turtle Rock there. You know where that is, Turtle Rock? Yes, I came in on that on a little, windy little, narrow road. That is a small road. And you take the whole road. You know, like people say, "Why don't you stay on your side?"

I met some idiot from some--I don't know who he was with but he was some guy with the government. "What are you doing over on my side of the road?"

"Hey, there is no sides on this road. It's a one-way road." The guy sees me and like, there's nothing I can do. And he just rode right up. And fine.

"Why don't you move over?"

And I said, "Where am I going to move?" So he backed off and drove into a ditch with the thing. "Thank you." [laughter] That was the only problem we had with both furnaces. The guy just was not using his head at all. He was a moron, you know.

But anyhow, we came along and got them up there, got them all the way up to the mine. It was just about dark when we got up there. And I'd left San Jose in the morning. It was a long, slow grind. I mean, real slow. I got up there and couldn't pull the hill, couldn't get enough traction when we got into that last turn. Right before you hit the mine, you come up from that Etquira Creek. All the way, right up to the last curve at the turn like that and the trailer kept pulling the truck so the outside wheels would spin.

So we had to go up and get a dozer then. We got that 241 and hooked onto it with the dozer and pulled it all the way up. That was a gravel road then. That was not paved or anything. So we drug it on up. And we had poured all the footings, had it all ready to go. So the next morning, backed the thing down and got it right in place, put some blocking across and rolled it right across and dropped it right on the rollers and I now got a furnace in place. It worked good. Worked pretty darn good.

Swent: What did you use for fuel?

Wilder: We started out running what they call PS-300. It's light burner oil. It's a black oil like bunker fuel. But then that became extinct, I guess. We ended up finally running on diesel. When we started out it was around eleven cents a gallon for fuel and it got up to a dollar twenty a gallon. But it was a nice plant.

Getting Supplies and Housing

Swent: You had to bring all that in, of course. You trucked that in from--

Wilder: Oh, that was trucked in. We used to buy all our fuel. Jim Jonas's dad--he was the first guy at Union Oil; that was Jack Jonas. Jim still supplies lube and stuff for them out here. But Jack Jonas was a neat old man. He used to wear tennis shoes and drive the truck himself. I mean, this is funny. It don't seem like it's that long ago. Jack Jonas was a real neat old man. He really was a good guy. He had a little Chevrolet truck and that's where we got all our lube oil and gasoline. He supplied us all the time. He came from this way. But for the furnace that all

came out of Basalt or G & W. We used quite a few different outfits: Telfer. We'd buy right out of the refinery, out of Shell Oil or something.

Swent: Where did you live?

Wilder: Oh, up here we put up a camp. When we first started, that's one of the first things we did was we brought in a mobile home. Of course, a brand new mobile, a twenty-foot, that would be a double wide with all furnishings. It cost about $7,200 set up. That's put up and set up in the ground and everything. What was that, a Skyline? It was something that became the Homestake office. Do you remember the Homestake office?

Swent: I remember it, yes.

Wilder: That was our original bunk house, basically.

Swent: I remember being told that, yes.

Wilder: But it was green at that time because back in the sixties, that would be '66 when we put that in up there. So probably that had to be--oh, it was funny. [laughter] I think about it. Up here in the middle of nothing was a bunch of guys living here and we got these gold drapes, I mean, and all this jazzy furniture, white and gold furniture. I mean, it was hilarious that way, you know. But it was really pretty nice. It was a nice thing so we set up a porch immediately. We had all these big timbers, six by sixteens and stuff so we make a porch that won't quit, six by sixteen porch, twenty-five feet long or something out there because you don't even have to put a nail in it. You just set the timbers up and stack them up, you know, like steps and then a flat deck and oh, it was really pretty nice. I used it later when I lived up there. I moved the porch over.

When Homestake set--oh, no, they bought these little tin shacks up here, you know those old Sears Roebuck shacks. I said, "Oh, my God." You stand up and you've got your head against the roof, you know. This can't work very long. They lasted just about long enough to fall apart, see. So in the meantime I said, "Why don't you do something, rent this thing?"

"No, no. We got our own thing."

"Okay."

Homestake People Destroy a Nice Mobile Home

Wilder: So in the meantime, I let them use it for nothing and let them store the drilling mud and stuff. And darn guys, they stacked the drilling mud on the floor of the house. It's like your house and they stack it up to the ceiling. Then a whole stack of sacks fell over and they knocked the wall out between bedrooms. Then they caught it on fire. I said, "Jeez, I don't mind lending you something but you're completely destroying it."

I think Tom Kalk was running the operation. Tom said, "Well, go fix it and we'll pay the bill for fixing it."

So I said, "Well, okay." We totalled those inside walls. They were all destroyed anyhow. We leveled the trailer up again because they loaded it like ten tons in one corner. We fixed that and took all those interior walls out of it. Then the ceiling came down because it had rained. And blasting up there, we had a couple of bad shots and rocks would go, boom, come through the roof and there was a hole in the roof.

We fixed all that, built a roof over it. And I'm doing this then with my guys. Whenever we had any slack time, we'd go work on the house and pushing them pretty hard on it, too, because I had, you know, maybe ten, fifteen guys working at the mine all the time then.

Homestake said, "No, we're fine in our little metal shacks."

Okay. So we went ahead on that.

Then they were going to have this board of directors meeting up there. That must have been before the thing was decided, when they had the model. About that year or maybe the year before that. And they'd been up and oh, it gets so cold and miserable out there. And Dr. McLaughlin was alive then because then they came up to the house and Kay had fixed a big pot of soup and everything. Paul Henshaw; and Harry Conger was there. Dr. McLaughlin, Paul Henshaw, Don Delicate. There was a whole bunch there. As a matter of fact, it was amazing. We had a house full of people because the board of directors was all out there freezing.

We said, "Gee, come up to the house and have some soup and coffee and stuff like that. We can make some sandwiches." She did and it was pretty nice.

They were like, "Gee, this is beautiful because it's so miserable outside."

Matsumotos Pull Out

Swent: Let's go back to when you were still in partnership with Matsumoto.

Wilder: Oh, yes. Okay, well, then we had built the plant. They were still partners in it.

Swent: You brought the furnace up.

Wilder: Oh, yes. We got the furnace up and we got it running. And Jimmy, who was the one who committed suicide, Jimmy was still alive when we started this thing. That's right. He hadn't committed suicide when Joe disappeared. That happened after. I got Jimmy ahead of Joe. Jimmy went over to Japan and brought a Japanese bride back.

I'm trying to think up here how that worked. Oh, I know. When Jimmy committed suicide, we had the furnace and had it in the yard, had all the stuff and done all this drilling, set up the lab and everything for assaying and had the new trailer for the bunk house. We didn't have the furnace going up here yet. We hadn't started putting it up. And Gordon Gould was just going to start designing it.

And Jimmy committed suicide. And then his wife was from Japan and with the Matsumoto brothers this was a bad situation because legally she'd be entitled to a share of everything in the family and she was a bride for about two weeks. Anyhow, they worked out something and they shipped her back to Japan.

But in the meantime, it delayed things as far as getting started on this about a year. At the time we started into this, mercury was selling for around $740 a flask, big-time money. I said, "Oh, boy, we can't miss on this." By the time we got the plant built--it took darn near a year to build the plant. It was a big operation, conveyors and bins and crushers; for us it was a big deal. Anyhow, by the time we got it running, the price was down to 400. We ran the first week or two at 400 and 375 and then 350 and 300 and oh, we watched the money fade away just like that again. We ran and then we'd go up to 325 and then down to 250 and up and down like that. Finally got down to ninety-nine dollars. And Matsumotos were thoroughly disgusted with it.

They said, "We're not making any money." And we lost $7,000 in one year.

Now, they'd say, "Seven thousand, don't worry about it." But it was a different thing then. They were worried about it plenty. They said, "Hey, we just can't do this. We're going to shut it down and that's it."

I said, "Jeez, I can't do that. All the equipment is mine. The furnaces are mine." They weren't part of the thing. The furnaces are mine. All the equipment is mine and I've got my life into this thing now. I can't do that.

So they said, "Well, we're not putting another dime in it."

And I said, "Well, that's all right. What we'll do then is why don't you buy me out then and I'll go away."

"Oh, we're not putting no money into this thing."

I said, "Okay, I'll buy you out then, by the same token."

They said, "Where are you going to get the dough?"

I said, "Don't worry, I'll do it all right."

So we did. They said, "Okay." They wanted I think it was 125,000--130,000, which was a bunch of money. All we had was a lease on the property. I didn't have the financial backing from Bank of America to lease this thing even. You know, they got a lease.

Well, they got a million dollars or something. Matsumotos did have a lot of money, which I was instrumental in getting for them, too, that deal, the Harney deal, see. When old Charlie Harney died. You know, they bought all the equipment. Well, I lined that up. I ran into that woman through one of the guys who went into the army with me. That's how a small world, it works out. But anyhow, that was beside the point. That kind of happened. So I did buy them out. That was in '73.

Swent: Where did you get the money?

Wilder: Well, my dad had died and had left me some money and then we were running some ore up here, running on a face and the same little deal again, a little seam about like that, wandering around up here to see can I make it that way.

Good Ore in the Gale Pit

Wilder: But I had a guy Tom Austin working for me. And Tom and I were pretty close. He's a miner, not a geologist or anything else. He's a miner and got a nose for ore. He and I were together almost all the time, seven days a week. We figured and figured and figured and we made a couple of wild cuts in there. Suddenly we got four bodies twice as wide as the room here.

Swent: Where was that?

Wilder: That was up in the Gale. And boy, we hit some hellacious good ore. I mean, it was just fantastic.

Swent: Mercury, again.

Wilder: Oh, yes. But that old furnace was running about thirty flasks a day which was pretty nice, see, because we were down there, at times, two flasks a day or something, which was ninety-nine dollars. That's $200 a day. At $300 it's 600. Six hundred dollars would run that plant, you know. I mean, everybody was--you didn't have all the health [benefits] and baloney that went on on this thing. You know, you paid bills if somebody got sick and went in the hospital; if they didn't have the dough, I'd help them with it. And everybody would kind of do things. And the doctor bill didn't cost $10,000. It would be $100 or $500. There was a lot of difference. But anyhow, that ore turned into some astronomically good ore.

So we ran that and I was very conscious of this thing because the deal I made with Matsumoto was that as of--I don't know the date now. It could be dug up easy. But the date, as of this date, will consummate this thing as of January first, all the bills are mine. There's no losses. I'll pay all the bills. I'll take all the profits. And this thing is my operation. I'll pay you off in full like in August. Okay, that's a deal. So we did sign it and had a contract to that effect.

Then when this ore started getting better, we just ran the heck out of it, gutted the mine somewhat, took the best ore and ran it through the plant, loaded the pickup and hauled loads of mercury down to Mountain View. My daughter lived down there and in her garage would stack up the--I had 500 flasks stacked up in her garage. And see, at the time when they pulled out of it, it was down to about 125, maybe 150 a flask. It went up to 350, 375. I got 500 flasks. Suddenly, this outfit is so solvent now that you can't believe it. I mean, it was beautiful. I had some dough from my dad's estate. And August came.

Buying the Mine from the Knox Estate

Wilder: In the meantime, I talked to the people on the lease and that was the Knox estate, which was held by the Bank of America. They said, "Well, we want something, you know. We've got to have this big--we've got to have a bunch of dough, something that guarantees a lease."

I went, well, "How about buying the property?" You know, I could do that.

"Are you interested in buying?" Yep, and I worked out an agreement and they got an appraisal on it and I agreed. I bought it. I put so much money down. I think it was only $10,000 down on the thing and then I had to pay for it, though, you know, and within a year or something like two years. It worked out pretty good there.

When I went in to Matsumoto and I paid them off, they said, "What about this lease, now? You're not financially capable of getting this lease."

I said, "I don't need it because I bought the property." So it worked out good. I was covered pretty well on that. I bought the property then and that was a new venture.

Swent: Was it patented?

Wilder: Oh, yes. That's the part right now that if you haven't seen this thing at--you lose a lot of faith in bureaucracies right now.

Swent: I'd somehow thought that you had patented it after you bought it.

Wilder: Oh, no. No, no. This was patented back in--that's the distressing part about this is, they're turning things over now to the state, patents issued in 1890. The original patent application was 1874. Everybody--but now I'm getting something--this is on some rim land. The stuff that was patented was patented. But there was a state patent issued and now the guys from BLM are saying, "Well, that state guy really--we did give the title to him but this guy wasn't qualified. He was only the surveyor general of the state of California. But he is not qualified to sign this. And the state can't be bound by this guy. He shouldn't have done that."

Well, then it was done again in 1890. "Well, that guy who signed that didn't have the authority of just looking."

Well, wait a minute, they paid taxes on it. In other words, it had unlimited use of this land. As a matter of fact, I have letters from the State and letters from the Feds saying, "Well, this belongs to you." And there's a quiet title action. The court says if nobody comes forward, this is yours. And everybody is satisfied and everybody agrees.

Now, there's last year and Homestake is involved in this thing, in this lawsuit on this rim land. They're trying to take that perimeter land. And it's crooked. What it is, is a sign of the times and that bothers me more than anything about this--talk about moral decay. Maybe I'm not the most moral guy in the world, but I tell you, I look at these guys and these guys are wearing white hats and they've got black hearts or something. But this is in a soap box type of thing, you know. But it's the truth. All you've got to do is just look at the morals of the people and look at the morals of the people back in 1900. Then you begin to really wonder. They never had half the fees that they got today, you know.

Swent: I'm afraid not.

Wilder: So anyhow, that's beside. That's how I ended up with it.

A New Partnership with Wells, Wacasser, Williams, and Hall

Swent: You bought it all by yourself?

Wilder: Yes, it was when I bought Matsumotos out. Then I formed a new venture right away with a guy who was my bookkeeper. That was Ed Wells. And Howard Wacasser was my right-hand man as far as in the maintenance. He and I built stuff together and mechanicked together on the mine. We kept the plant running. I gave Howard, I think it was one and a half percent of the thing.

Swent: Was it his son who married your daughter?

Wilder: Yes. And Howard's son is still running the shovel out there.

Swent: But that was later that they were married.

Wilder: That was later, yes, because Bert was just a little kid when Howard moved on the mine. Allen was crippled and had a brace between his legs. The hip joints were not fully formed or something. And Allen would go around with this brace on his legs

and Bert was a little guy. Bert was an accident waiting to happen.

I can remember something so funny. We had some cattle on the place there. Pete Lopez ran cattle all the time. He'd keep us supplied in beef all the time. Everybody had beef. But we had these little calves in there, oh, about nine-ten months old calves. The kids get home from school. We built a little corral there--Patty had a horse and Sherry had a horse. The horses were gone but they had the corral. And Kelly and Bert and Allen were down there.

I just came in the gate in the pickup and it must have been about five o'clock. And this corral, the ground was just powdery dust. And they got this calf in there and they're playing like cowboys. And Bert says, "Watch this, Mr. Wilder." And he takes a shirt or something and goes, "Hey, toro." And this little yearling steer just mowed him. Just rrrrm, bam, into the dust and then ran all over on top of him. And Bert got up and the only thing white was his eyeballs and his teeth. He was just powdered dust and he got two big lumps on his head. [laughs] I went out there, got that steer away from him. That was hilarious. I still laugh about that. Bert's just--he is. He's a terror. He's fearless.

Swent: You had three partners, didn't you?

Wilder: Actually when we started the new venture, there was George Hall and Lou Hall. And they split up. I bought them out because they split up. There was Sam Williams and Kathleen Herringshaw and Ed Wells, who was my bookkeeper.

Swent: Oh, you had a lot of people.

Wilder: Yes, okay, well, Ed married Kathleen. Then they moved up to the mine. Ed lived down in Palo Alto and rented--just things went bad down there for him so he said, "Hey, can I get a job? I mean, I've got to get something going. I'm not doing well at all." So Ed and Kathleen moved up there. We bought a new trailer for them. They had a place up there on the mine and Ed worked, did the bookkeeping, office work, and did a shift on the furnace, whatever--in other words, we don't have, "You're a bookkeeper." No, you're a bookkeeper, mechanic, a truck driver, whatever. You learn everything. Howard did everything except the bookkeeping.

Let's see, Sam Williams who was--Jim Williams owned an outfit called Williams & Lane down there in Berkeley. Remember them at all? Right on East Shore Highway was Williams & Lane. That was his daughter. She was a partner in it. So that was the partners

in it. There was Bud Williams and Irene. I bought them out. I bought George Hall and Lou Hall out and Patty Hall. That was his daughter. Then Ed Wells is still in it. He still gets royalty and Wacasser, Juanita. Naomi died. That was Howard's wife. So then he remarried. That was Juanita. She still gets royalty on this.

Swent: You called it the One Shot.

Wilder: We called it One Shot and then we started. That was Tom Matsumoto's thing because he said, "Boy, this better be a one shot because if we don't make it on this one, we're out of the mining business. And that's that." That is a good name because everybody that goes into mining comes up with names like "World Wide Amalgamated Minerals Company" and they're a hole in the wall. Let's go to the smallest name we can think of where everybody is really doubtful. It's better to be little and get bigger than it is to be big and fail.

Swent: That's right.

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Swent: You were the only one of these people in your group that knew anything about mining, weren't you?

Wilder: Yes.

Swent: These other people were just investors.

Wilder: Well, they were. They were all interested, but you're right. There was no miners at all in the whole bunch.

Swent: But you put some of them to work.

Wilder: Put them all to work.

Swent: Put them all to work.

Wilder: Yes, I mean, there was no free lunch in this thing, never was. In other words, I don't have some outfit that you can have somebody just hanging around.

Swent: No.

Wilder: If they're going to hang around, they better work. Either that or go away. I mean, I still do that. I believe if you just got somebody hanging around they're taking time that somebody could be producing something.

VI THE MANHATTAN MINE

Lack of Money a Good Incentive

Swent: But you were the one that organized it and called the shots.

Wilder: Yes, I ran the thing and I did most of the thinking on the designing and stuff. The furnace stuff, now, these were all my ideas that we had in there and there was no doubt about that. Mike Fopp was an engineer and a pretty good one. So was Gordon Gould. I did some things that weren't supposed to be able to be done. I did them and there's no doubt about it. My feeder, my condenser system and all that. It worked. It worked awful good and I made it out of, like making a silk purse out of a sow's ear, you know.

Swent: You designed those yourself.

Wilder: Yes. Biggest incentive to thinking these things is a lack of money. That's true. I mean, no doubt. Necessity is the mother of invention.

Swent: It's a good incentive, all right.

Wilder: It's true because you throw a lot of money at something, there's no incentive to invent anything because, why? Just go get it. I have to be careful with the kids, even, on that. You know, I start doing things--well, just--"Why don't you just fix this thing?"

"Ah, just go get another one." See, so we throw it away.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Oh, a light bulb burned out." We just throw it away, you know. This is not unusual. It's a very normal thing, I think.

That up there was poverty hill, you could say, in a lot of ways. We lived good. We never hurt for living up there. It was more than likely about as good as anybody ever really wanted to live. I don't know anybody yet that has been up there, stayed up there any length of time that didn't say, "Hey, some of the best days of my life were out there on that mining operation." A lot of people told me that, have come up and visited from down below and stayed a week or two and they've said, "You just have it pretty--" It was pretty good.

You know, you have a lot of work. The power went off. The lights started to get dim or something. Wow, big beeline. If the furnace plant wasn't running you hot-footed it down there. If you came home from the city at night, the first thing you'd look is if you had a spotlight on the stack. If the wind was blowing hard, you wouldn't see it. You see the stack and the spotlight and no plume, see. Uh, oh. Wonder what went wrong now. Then all of a sudden, the wind would die down and the plume would come up. Ha, ha.

It was funny. I went to dinner with Harry Conger and Jim Anderson, a bunch of them. They took me to that World Trade Center. Harry's wife was sitting next to me and she was a nice lady. I liked her. I'm not the type you'd think--like taking a pet gorilla someplace, you know. I'm kind of trying to follow the lead on this thing and it's kind of a swanky place for me. She was cluing me in on things. But we talked a lot.

She said when Harry was running that Eagle Mountain Mine, they'd leave Los Angeles, heading out there, he'd say, "Should have passed a train back there, a little train, the ore train from Eagle Mountain to Fontana. Should have passed them." They'd go on for another fifteen miles; still no train. "I wonder what's wrong. Something's wrong. There's got to be something wrong. The train should have been there." Then all of a sudden, they'd pass the train. [laughter]

And I said, "I know the feeling." That was the stack. You'd come up the hill. Uh, oh. I wonder what happened, you know. The brick fell in on the furnace. You have disasters all the time. And I said, "I know exactly what he was doing," because if the train ain't there, then something bad happened. You know, it's not good. Then when you do pass it you say, "Oh, God, that's good."

Swent: So were you operating the furnace all the time?

Wilder: Well, no, when the price would be really down, if it got down so low, I'd just stop operating. Then we went in to making decorative rock.

Swent: You were reclaiming batteries.

Wilder: Oh, that was later. That was when the price was fairly good. But that was big-time. That was not a little fly-by-night thing. That was good.

Swent: But at first you were mining.

Wilder: We mined all the time, even then, up in '81. We still ran ore in '81. That was the last run we made.

Swent: It was cinnabar and also there's free mercury, isn't there?

Wilder: Free quick[silver] is a little different. That occurred but not really, no. It's all show and no go. In other words, you see--Wow! Look at all that mercury. And you put it all together and oh, boy. You've got a half a pound to the ton. The cinnabar, you don't see anything. You put it all together and you've got ten pounds to the ton or something.

Swent: Where were you marketing your quicksilver?

Wilder: Through Phillips brothers. A lot to quicksilver producers down in San Francisco and then to a lot of outfits in Colombia, South America. Oh, boy. I could go back. There were all kinds of outfits we've sold it to.

Swent: But you were doing it directly?

Wilder: Yes. We sold it ourself. We didn't have anybody handle it for us. It's better off to do it yourself. Then you find out who your friends are and who was the sharks. The other way, you'd never know one from the other. When the price got down, we built a little mill. I have some pictures of that, too, a little cinnabar mill. An outfit called Lee Yuen Fung Company from Hong Kong came over and they contacted me. I was kind of amazed. Here's people from Hong Kong up here at the mine. You've got people from all over the world. We have people from the Almaden, Spain, and from Trieste and everywhere come in. I had a guest book that you wouldn't believe signed by these people and Alaska and jeez, everywhere, all over the world. You'd say, "What are they doing?"

A Turk asked me to go to Turkey on a mine over there. I said, "No, this is my mine." I'm just working here, see. It was

a guy named Einak, Mel's brother. Mel Einak was a friend of mine, too, over here, an architect.

Marketing Cinnabar to Hong Kong

Wilder: This guy from Lee Yuen Fung Company--I can't remember his name, now. But God, they were nice people. They were really nice people and they said, "We need cinnabar over there for making jewelry boxes and stuff like that, and packaging certain aids, herbs. We preserve them." He looked at some samples that we have of cinnabar.

I made some samples up, sent them to him. He came back over. He said, "Can you make this and this?"

"Yes."

"This size?"

"Yes." So then we did that. We'd package it in five-gallon buckets and haul them over to the Sacramento Airport and air freight them to Hong Kong.

Swent: Did you just take it right out of the mine and send it?

Wilder: Well, no. There was a little more to it. We built a little plant to clean all the dirt out of it so it was a nice beautiful red, and not real purple. He didn't want purple. He wanted red, more of a scarlet color. Mercury at that time was selling for about a hundred dollars, ninety-nine dollars a flask which would be roughly a dollar and a half a pound. We were selling this stuff for twenty-two fifty a kilo in Hong Kong and they paid all the freight. Everybody else is dying and we're--gee, this is pretty good, you know. It was not a big operation but it helped pay the bills. So we did that.

Selling Decorative Rock

Wilder: Then we said, well, decorative rock. All that beautiful rock. We had an outfit come in. We said, "Well, let's just crush some of it up and see what it does." We ran it through the screen and it come up in about four different sizes. And Sunrise Rock out of Sacramento come in and they started buying it. Gee, we couldn't

keep up with the demand there so we built a plant for it. We made about six, eight different colors. But that mine was spectacular. It would do anything you wanted just about.

Swent: What kind of plant did you have?

Wilder: A crushing plant and screening plant to size it. Then we'd run greens; we'd have a green product. We'd put it in the bins and then stockpile it with dump trucks. Then we're going to change to a white product. We had that white chalcedony, so we crushed that and stockpiled that. Then we ran the basalt calcines and we made a cocoa brown which is a beautiful brown color, better than this red rock. It didn't have that gaudy look to it. It was real subdued but beautiful. Then we mixed the green and brown by accident. That's a beautiful color, a tweed; so we made that. Nobody else had half these colors. We had a pretty good little business going on.

About the time that we built that new plant was the time that Ken Jones--do you remember Ken? Did you remember him?

Swent: I remember the name.

Don Gustafson, the First Homestake Geologist to Visit

Wilder: Ken came up here and Don Gustafson was the first one up here. I saw Don at the thing the other day [May, 1994, celebration and open house at the McLaughlin Mine.]

Swent: Yes, he was there that day.

Wilder: Don was the first guy who came in and said, "Could I look around?"

"What do you want to look for?" We were busy working on this rock plant and it was a miserable day.

He says, "Oh, just minerals, you know."

"I'm busy right now." We were trying to build this rock plant is what it was. I think that's what it was. No, we were rebuilding a crusher that I hauled up. I bought a plant down in Planada, down by Merced. Planada is a Spanish name. Planada and by Tuttle and that way, going to Yosemite from Merced. I bought a county rock plant. So I had to drive back and forth, take that down. That was Billy and Rick. Rick is here, Rick Barber still works for the company. That's my stepson, see. So that was kind

of funny. We went down there, took that down and hauled it up here and started putting it up together. In the meantime, Homestake had come in. Oh, we sold the crusher from that because I needed some money. We sold the crusher in Cathlamet, Washington.

We rebuilt the crusher; a guy came down and says, "Can I look at it?" And said, "Oh, man, it's a deal."

And I said, "Good."

And he says, "Hey, I can't get anybody to haul it. Will you haul it?"

I don't want to haul it to Washington. Holy smokes!

He said, "Well, can you get somebody?" He said, "Why don't you take a couple of days? Take a week and you're getting paid for it."

I don't know. He paid me something, a thousand, $1200 to haul it up there. I said, gosh, that's an idea. I haven't been out. I've been working on this thing all the time. I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

He said, "Okay."

And I took off, hauled that crusher up there. It was a little vacation in a way. We take a vacation in a truck, see. [laughter] Instead of driving cars, heck, we're driving a truck. That's all.

I like doing that, in some ways. You know, it is nice to drive a car but it doesn't impress me. I've got a lot of cars now and I still drive a truck most of the time. It's kind of different. They sit better. Cars sit down and you can't see. This thing, I'm sitting up.

Swent: Trucks run the road.

Wilder: Yes, and you're sitting straight. Your back is straight and your legs, you're sitting on the back of your legs.

Swent: You own the road.

Wilder: So, that was good. And Kay was pretty good. She would ride back and forth all the time in that truck. It was one of them things, you know. Kay's a pretty classy lady. She's not some hillbilly or something that come out of here, you know, because she went to

James William Wilder and Donald Gustafson with first gold bars from McLaughlin Mine, 4 March 1985.

Photograph courtesy of Dennis Goldstein
Homestake Mining Company

Notre Dame and all that. That's kind of a little bit of a training school.

Swent: Don Gustafson was the first one who came in.

Wilder: First one that came in and so we said, "Have at it."

He came back and said, "Gee, I'd like to come back again."

"Good, come back." So he came back and then next thing I know, I think he came down with Ken Jones.

They said, "Gee, we'd like to buy the place. You want to sell it?"

"Nope, not really. We're, you know, we're not interested."

"Well, how about leasing it?"

"No, I don't think we really want to lease it. We're busy, you know, right now."

Swent: Didn't they have to get your permission and pay you something to come in and look?

Wilder: Oh, to come in, after, when we signed a lease. Before that, no. I said, "Just stay out of our area. We're busy. We don't have any intentions of leasing to you. We don't have any intentions of selling to you. So you understand that you don't do a lot of work for nothing and then say, 'Well, you didn't sell it to us,' because," I said, "I don't have any intentions of selling it to you." That's funny. So they did that.

Finally, Ken Jones is coming down about, jeez, three days a week, I think, and bringing me a bag of donuts and the newspaper. He's coming all the way from Reno and I'm feeling bad. I said, "God, Ken, you've got to be leaving home at four o'clock in the morning to get here. And you're making me feel terrible about this. I don't want to be obligated to you. You're a real nice guy and everything but I have no intentions of this." It was really kind of disheartening to him because he was kind of crushed about it because he is a nice guy and a real intelligent geologist, not just some half-baked lunatic.

Wilder's Previous Assay for Gold: a Good Result

Swent: Did you know that they had found gold?

Wilder: Yes, I did and I had found gold before. This was not some secret. I did tell them that, too. If I tell the truth on these things and tell everything I know right up front, there's never any subterfuge involved, and I did do that. Told them I had a gold assay. It was done by reliable people. That was Martin Quist who had Metallurgical Labs in San Francisco. Martin used to be the assayer for New Idria. But Martin did run them down here at Metallurgical Labs.

Mel Stinson was the state geologist. I used to see Mel all the time. We'd either go get lunch or a cup of coffee or something down in San Francisco when I've been out to deliver some mercury, see. And Mel told me, "You ought to get an assay on that because you could have some gold or silver in there."

I kind of went, "Oh, Mel, this is like looking for elephants in the Mojave desert, you know, in the wrong country."

He said, "No, Bill, that thing looks like it."

I hadn't paid much attention to it. But I went up to Metallurgical Labs and left a sample. God, I got a call from them through Mike Fopp or something. He came up. There was no phone at the mine. And he said, "God, I got a call from Metallurgical Labs. They'd like to talk to you."

So I went and phoned them.

They said, "Hey, you ought to come down. Next time you come down, stop in because this is interesting. You've got something there."

I said, "Well, what is it?"

"Well, it's about two thirds of an ounce, .675. I said, "Wow, that's pretty good." But gold was thirty-five dollars and ounce so now we got twenty dollars a ton in gold. We've got mercury that is running thirty, forty dollars a ton. What are we going to be fooling around with gold at half the price? So, I said, "Okay, that's good." I stopped in and talked to them. And I said, "Gee, that's nice." No interest in it though because what good is it? But then gold changed, see, in '73. It was still thirty-five dollars, I think it was. Along in there, someplace,

'73, '74 it started going up. Then it went up and went back and up and down. Didn't worry about it.

We were busy on mercury and so Ken Jones came down and I didn't hear from him for a long time on that. It must have been, oh, maybe three weeks. Then all of a sudden, I came home from down the plant up to the trailer. And uh, oh, there's a car parked out in front. That's Ken's car and another car, too, I think. Yes, it was two cars. I don't know what's going on.

Then Ken says, "Hi, Bill." Real friendly and everything. He said, "This is Bill Casburn. He's a lawyer. He's an attorney with Homestake."

And I went, "Oh, my God. Now what the heck is going on? It's something." I look at big companies like--look out. I'm a very little company and they're a very big company. Look out because they'll step on you and not even know it. I just wouldn't hardly given them the right time, you know. I mean, Bill was trying to be friendly. I'm going, "Hmm. Wonder what he means by that?" I'm very gun-shy because I'm trying to--I'm listening to everything and analyzing everything as fast as I can, filing it so I can hash it over later.

That must have been on a Friday; they stayed for a couple of hours. I think they may have had a bite to eat and talked and then they left. It was a good kind of a thing, you know, funny thing.

Bill Casburn of Homestake Also Comes to Visit

Wilder: I think it was Sunday, Kay and I were at home and all of a sudden, a car drives up. We didn't lock the gate. A car drives up and I'll be darned. I don't recognize the car. It was Bill Casburn and he brought his wife along, Jean.

Swent: He was the land man for Homestake.

Wilder: Yes, land man. He was also an attorney.

Then he comes up and he goes, "Hi, Bill." I said, jeez, you know, I don't know him that well. I'm pretty nervous. "I brought my wife along. I thought, maybe we could go to town and get dinner. I would like to talk to you some more, Bill, get to know you a little."

So we went to town. I said, "Sure, that's a good offer, you know." We went to town and had a bite to eat and talked and came back home. It's a long ways from there, so they stayed over. I said, "Yes, stay over." We have a spare bedroom; they stayed in the guest room. And that was kind of good. Then they left the next morning. It must have been Monday morning, Bill left.

Then didn't see anything for a long time, for a week or something, maybe. Then he came back up and he brought some beer and stuff and it was about five o'clock and getting there, it was dark. It must have been during the winter time because he brought beer up for the crew. That was Billy and all the guys and we had a big bull session, kind of, down at the mill and that. Bill hung around and talked by himself. He'd talk about things.

He got to know everybody, kids all know Bill real well and he just got to know how the operation functioned and what was going on all the time and telling war stories, you know, type thing. And it was good. Bill's a pretty good hand at that. He's a good hand. They kept doing this and finally Bill said, "God, well, Bill, we'd like to explore this. We'd like to get a lease before we do any exploration."

I said, "Bill, I have no intentions of leasing at all."

"Why not?"

And I said, "Well, we're just a little one-horse outfit and we'll get eaten up in this thing. You know, we don't have any legal staff. We don't have anything. We're damn lucky to be functioning, you know."

A Lease is Offered

Wilder: So he said, "Well, let me bring up a lease next time." He brought up a lease and he said, "Here, look at this. This is our lease."

I looked at it. I read about the first two paragraphs and said, "Bill, I'd have to have a wooden head to sign this thing. This thing is so--you've got everything. This is trading a sardine for a salmon. That's what it is. You're going to give me the sardine, see."

And so he laughed and he said, "Well, let me see. Let me get some other leases together, here." So he came up and had about five different leases.

And I'd read them and I wouldn't get into them two paragraphs and I'd say, "Oh, no, no. You've got this, you've got--hey, we don't have anything. We're giving the whole farm away." So I said, "No, I think we better stay with that."

He said, "Okay, let's take the least restrictive one. Let's go through it. Okay, the first paragraph. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with the first paragraph."

"All right, the next paragraph."

"Well, I mean, this is where you have the right to stockpile any place on the thing, material, and I don't have the right to do anything here, see."

"Well, let's change that, that we have the right to stockpile at your direction. We can do it and you have the right to use any place you want on here."

"Okay, that sounds more like it." We go on and on and on in terms and then: water.

"Well, Homestake has the right to use the water as necessary for drilling."

"Wait a minute. This is great. But what about the One Shot? The One Shot needs water to keep the plant running, keep the people alive out here."

"Well, then, let's work it so that One Shot has the first shot at all the water and any surplus water that's available is available to Homestake." And he did it. He was good. I'll tell you, I learned a bunch because the way he did this was to say, "Okay, if all the water belongs to One Shot, Homestake has no water rights or no right to any water whatsoever."

I go, "Now, wait a minute. That's not fair either."

So, see, he did a little strategy that I've never seen anybody do before. He put me on his side and he's taking my side, now, see. You know, and this all of a sudden, inherently, you've got to know your person. If you've got a guy who's a thief, he's going to say, "Good," and take it. But if you've got a guy that's halfway, you know, that's got some compassion, he's going to say, "Wait, I don't want to take everything from you. That isn't right, either."

"Okay, let's work something out where we split the water."

"Okay, let's do that." And so that's how he would write it up.

We did this for a month and he came up with this lease. And he said, "Well, now what's wrong with this lease?" Well, I wrote the lease. That's what's wrong. That's how we did this by going every point.

I said, "Wait, I've got to look this over more, Bill." I went out to Fort Bragg up the Wage's Creek up there and sat on the beach for a week, brought the camper. You know, we've got a travel trailer. Sat there and all I did was read. The intent of this paragraph is this. This sentence means this and this. Took this thing apart, right down the line. Anything that I saw that I didn't think was right, I put a question mark and then noted it on paper.

Asked him and he'd say, "No, they will change it to where it means this." And he said, "Well, what's wrong with this lease now?"

"Jeez, I guess there's nothing."

VII A DEAL WITH HOMESTAKE MINING COMPANY

The Exploration Phase

Wilder: So we did sign a lease then. And you know what I charged them for a fee for exploration while they had the property, a thousand acres, I charged them $1300 a month. And we supplied them with power, water and--so that was not too bad, see.

Swent: A pretty nice deal for them.

Wilder: Oh, sure. It was a good deal for them. I knew that. But I said, "Well, we'll find out."

And Mike Fopp told me, "Bill, if they offer you a million dollars, you grab it and run. Don't even pick up the equipment. Get out of here."

I said, "Mike, that's insane. That's not true. I've got my whole life in this thing." And the mine is better than that. It deserves a better shake than that. And it did. I was right. I know that. So it worked out pretty good.

It's funny but I don't think--money-wise I've never really been very interested in money. Right now, what do I do with all the money? I lose it, most of it. Not lose it; I buy some property. Some guy's going to lose his property, lose his house. I'd go bail him out and then the guy goes south or something. But some of these things, it's--what the heck. It's made to help some people live. I know a lot of things. I'm not being--. This is not some great claim to fame. It's just that I got a weak mind on some of those things and I don't spend my money for clothes and I don't spend it buying new cars or--we live in a nice house, I think, on a nice little ranch.

Like Lynne now, is my lady friend and she's into horses. She likes horses. She wants something to pull her horse trailer with and she's going up north. I have a '73 Dodge truck. It's a little truck, pickup length, only it's a one-ton. On weekends if we have some spare time instead of standing around--we don't drink; we don't do much of anything. We go out and work on that. It's going to be spectacular, I think. It'll be like a show truck, you know.

An Investment in Old San Francisco City Buses

Swent: You used to collect--you had school buses?

Wilder: Oh, say. That was one of my phases. When was that? That was about '59. I bought those city buses, city of San Francisco. We bought two hundred of them. Then there was a problem. A guy named Lenway said, "Well, this didn't go to bid," which it didn't. It was a negotiated purchase with Jim Leary; he was the city purchaser in San Francisco.

Then we went back and bid them. And we did; we bought something like sixty-five of them. Then this time we didn't just buy two hundred buses or two hundred and twenty buses; we bought sixty-five that were all ready to run. I had all the maintenance records and everything on them. And I went and spent some time on that; then I had them sold in South America.

Then the city purchaser said, "Jeez, Bill, looks like they may play the [World] Series in Candlestick, and we don't have enough buses to haul the people there. Can we keep them?"

That was dumb on my part, in a way. But I said, "Sure, that's all right."

And he said, "Okay, we'll wash them and bring them down to the dock for you."

Because I said, "Gee, I got them sold. I'm going to make some money on them," which I thought was kind of neat.

But the trouble was, in the period of time that they fooled around, the law changed. They went over the time. You can't export something into a lot of these countries over ten years old. Suddenly, they're ten years and one month. Ah! They're not legal so the whole thing fell apart because the buses were too old then. But in the meantime, we sold--some of them went to Midway and Guam

and holy smokes! all over the state. It was something interesting, kind of fun.

Swent: You still had a couple up here, didn't you?

Wilder: Well, I still got three or four of them. Yes, we had about ten of them out there that we used for parts storage, and we made an assay lab in one of them. What could be better? If we had to build everything out in the boondocks, this is kind of hard. Building things takes a lot of money and time. This way, we haul them up in a transport, drop them down, put shelving in, and you got something out of the weather. Everything's out of the weather.

We had a little job office. We had an assay lab that's perfect; built benches. We had all the equipment for it so that it was a nice little assay lab. What the heck? Can't beat it. It's instant things. I had about ten of them. Maybe a window cracked and stuff like that. By the time I spent fooling with them, it wasn't worthwhile, you know. It was better to haul them up and use them. That's what we did with that. That worked out good.

Swent: I remembered there were some buses.

Wilder: Yes, they were city buses. You still see them in some of these old movies. And I go, "God, that's--well, no, the wrong number." You know, I can remember how they went. I think all the one hundreds were like--from 100 to 198 would be a certain year, you know.

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Wilder: And then 200, 300, 400, you know.

Swent: This lease that you're talking about with Casburn was the one just for exploration.

Wilder: That's all, for exploration. And we supplied them with water and we made the drill sites there for them. We did repairs for them for Longyear.

Oh, this is interesting. I felt good about this. We did a lot of work on that exploration. Like that office that they had. The board of directors came up here and they had this board meeting up there. They were going to show that big mine model. And it was completely trouble. Holy smokes! It looked like it was going to snow, you know. Bad rain or something.

And they said, "Oh, we're going to have a picnic out under an oak tree."

And I said, "Ha!" The day before, I said, "Tom, you better do some quick figuring because that isn't going to work."

And he went, "Hmmm." Tom's a good friend. And he says, "Bill, what about that office that you have there that's a building you're working on?"

I said, "Ha!" I got this all figured out. We had bathrooms in it and one great big room, see, and I think an office in the back.

I laid this out. I felt like that was some careful planning on my part because he said, "Hmmm. Could we use that because I've got the board of directors and we've got all this food and everything and no place to put them. They're going to be out under that oak tree in the rain."

Homestake and One Shot: A Harmonious Relationship

Wilder: Okay, he got that. So they used that. I felt good about that and maybe it's egotistical, but I guessed better than anybody else on that. I made sure we had it all done. It was wood floors, but it was nice and clean. Everything was cleaned and shined. So that worked good. It worked out perfect.

Then he said, "Hmmm. You know, after looking at this, could we rent this thing from you?"

I don't know. I think I got some fantastic thing, a hundred a month or two hundred a month for it.

Swent: You knew the situation, though.

Wilder: Well, I mean, for a hundred or two hundred dollars, they had about a 1200-foot office.

So then he said, "Hey, can you build one more? We got more work now and we don't have enough room for everybody."

Okay, so we build another one. I said, Ah, we'll get into something; that's when they're starting on this permitting baloney. Let's not do that. We had put a roof over this so we don't have to worry about roof leaking or anything. "Let's just

tie on this thing. We'll make it the longest trailer in the world."

It was sixty foot and we added, I think, forty or fifty feet more. We just continued the roof the same color and everything and we built this so it looked just all the same. The trailer, we sheeted the outside with plywood so it looked like a board and batten house, basically. Only we just made it long and we put a slab and we got it all done on the weekend so that Monday morning they came and I said, so we don't have any problem with somebody saying, Look what they're building without a permit, and this and that. It's all done. They came Monday morning and the thing was just longer, that's all, fifty feet.

That was pretty good. [laughter] There's a way to get around some of these things. And it worked out good. But they were good people. It was funny. I was over in Adelaide in Australia and talking to John Roberts. And he said, "God, I've got a guy in here that was up there on exploration with Homestake."

He was working over in Australia for John. And he went and got the guy, a geologist, and the guy said, "Gee, that was the best job I was ever on." He said, "Hey, that was the neatest thing because everybody got along so good." If a guy didn't work, he was gone in less than a week. Everybody worked like heck. The crew that Homestake had and the One Shot crew. It was like a big family.

Jack Thompson said that. One Christmas, he said, "This will more than likely be the last Christmas we'll be together like this, like a big family, you know, because," he said, "now it's got into a big deal." He said, "This will be more than likely the last time that it was all the One Shot guys and the Homestake people." There was a bunch of rivalry but really good friends. I mean, they were real close. But these water fights. My God, when a fire truck water fights, you know. I mean, it was funny and it was just a pretty good--it was one of those things.

It was almost like a bunch of guys that join the army. You get really close together and look out for each other. If a guy needs something, he's got it, right now. He's got a lot of support, like having a lot of brothers. It was good. And that's what this guy come in and he told that to John. He said, "That was the best job I've ever been on any place in the whole damn world. It was--ran so good and it was so much fun. We had fun while we were working, worked really hard."

Swent: What were you doing in Adelaide?

Wilder: Oh, I just went down there to visit and fooling around. I was down, went to Sydney and then I went over to Adelaide for a week or two. And I got trucks and I'm fooling around, bumming around and then I was down in New Zealand for about six weeks. Bummed around down there, looked at some of the mines out in Westport and Greymouth and a bunch of stuff there. Where the heck else did I go? Oh, Fiji. I went up there for a week or two. That was nice. There's a big mine up there, too, gold mine. That's what you do--

Swent: Have you gotten into any other mines?

Wilder: Some claims up there but we dropped them. This new thing is too much for me. It's to discourage you from mining; forget about it, you know. Up in Masonic, we had some stuff there, Bill and I, Bill Casburn and I. No, I told Bill, it's no good. It's not worthwhile fooling around with now. If I was going to go into mining, I'd go down to Mexico or something.

Negotiating the Final Deal for Sale and Royalty

Swent: What kind of arrangement did you finally make with Homestake? Do you want to tell about that?

Wilder: Oh, yes. Bill worked on that I'll bet for a year. And I think there was a lot of people on the board of directors that were hoping I'd have some kind of a fall or something, you know, because I was fairly hard to deal with I guess, in a way. Not really though as far as I was concerned, because I don't see that I should be putting my whole life into something and then giving the whole thing away. I said, as long as there's enough to sustain both of us, I think that my people are entitled to something, too, because they did just as much on the development of this thing. And they did say that.

That came up several times that we got this exploration work done at about half the normal time and about half of the normal cost or maybe less than half the normal cost. If we want any from Nevada or anyplace else, it would take twice as long and would cost four times as much. So that was pretty good. So I felt, well, we do have a vested interest in this thing, basically.

I think I was pretty tough on the royalty. I wanted five percent. That's net smelter returns, which was not too bad. A lot of people thought I was crazy, Bill Casburn included, you know. I mean, it was too much. I said, "No, I don't think so, Bill."

I didn't know yet what their projections were. I never asked--that's one thing I can truthfully say is I never made any attempt to find out anything. That's not fair. If Homestake is paying a bill for exploration, that's their information.

Kauffman was not the same. We caught him sneaking around up there in their office one day. My guys caught him. What he was trying to do was find out what they had learned, see. Now, that's not fair. I don't think that's ethical at all. So I didn't know but I had a pretty good idea that we're doing some good or they wouldn't be spending more money drilling, see.

Swent: Kauffman owned land that they also acquired.

Wilder: Ultimately. They acquired a headache, is what they did. So anyhow, that worked out where that 5 percent, I did lease it to them. That was our basic thing, that we did a land trade. I traded them this thousand acres for that fifty acres, fifty-six acres over in Kelseyville. That means I got about $300,000 for the thousand acres. It's not that much money. That's pretty cheap.

But I retained royalty which a lot of guys would have said, "Oh, no. So much for the land and the royalties and the this and that." Why, what the heck. If they don't go, what have you got? You've done something that has created a lot of problems. So this went good. Then they said, "We'd like to buy half the royalty back," so that's where we did come with some big money.

I said, "Well, I projected it and I want about $5 million for half of it. I'm figuring the total thing is going to be about $10 million, is my guess." Oh, jeez, they thought I was loony. But then they finally decided it was worthwhile.

History proves this to be a very smart move. Right now if they would have not bought that, they would have bought it anyhow several times over, see, because the royalties run way greater than that. That meant they would have been paying a whole bunch more. And it would have cost them well over the 5 million.

Swent: How many years were they were talking about? Twenty-five, maybe fifty years?

Wilder: No, they were talking basically twenty years. That was real numbers. Well, I figure '85 the start of production, 2005 the end, maybe. That's about right. That's twenty years.

Swent: But they're not going to be mining that long.

Wilder: No, they might end mining but there's a lot of--

Swent: Of course, the price of gold did the same thing the price of mercury did for you.

Wilder: Well, this is one of the things that--mines die hard. Harry Conger knows pretty well what the history there is.

Swent: They were projecting gold at $600 an ounce.

Wilder: Well, yes, that's true and what the reserves are. God knows what the reserves are but not too many other people. I've seen what's happened: we started out with a million ounces; we've already got a hat that says 2 million ounces [souvenir cap given to visitors at the open house]. That's double the initial projections; there's an easy additional 2 million ounces. So now we've got 4 million ounces; that's not too shabby. I think now the decline [underground exploration] and stuff, there may be another mine here. I got a feeling that there's another mine here.

Swent: It would be nice.

Wilder: Oh, I think it's not impossible. That's not impossible at all. That's very possible. But that could occur.

Swent: They're looking hard.

Wilder: Oh, it's nice here. And we'll see what the heck does happen. I don't know. Peter Steen [president of Homestake] said that. He said, "I agree with you on that." We talked about it.

I said, "I think there's another mine in the area."

He said, "You're saying exactly what I'm saying."

Swent: I hope so.

Wilder: Well, you've got to look at one thing. Name one gold mine. One gold mine, no other mines around it. Just name one. Couldn't you think of one?

Swent: No.

Wilder: I can't.

Swent: There's usually another one nearby.

Wilder: There's generally about four or five nearby. So that means if there's one here, Wilbur Springs cannot possibly be part of it.

So that means, isolate that. Now we're down to one. It's possible that there is only one in the whole world, right here. But I don't know of any others. I've researched this everywhere.

Then I got some funny things. I got a theory that I don't think I'm wrong on. One reason being that I can pick up tracers. I can pick up some things, that on this "line of strike" theory and I think it's pretty right. And I ask a lot of people that are a lot smarter than me on this stuff and they kind of go, "Hmmm, it is. What you've brought forth is pretty interesting." Down here, I've laid maps on top of each other and I just have them stacked up that way and I started looking. "Hey, wait a minute." This one fits here. If you look at mercury mines, you look at hot springs, you look at gold, you look at manganese, you look at the chromite. And they shift, but the trends are the same; the line of strike on all of them. That means we're following a line of strike. Everybody's looking North Park. Ah, they're geologists; they should know better than me, but I wouldn't bet on it. I don't think so. I think, to go through here out that way towards Island Mountain, you know, Island Mountain up by Covelo and that way. You know where that country is, up Eel River?

Swent: No, not really.

Wilder: Have you taken the train up to Eureka?

Swent: No, I haven't.

Wilder: Oh, boy, that's a shame because that's a beautiful ride. I don't think they're running that, now, though. But about two years ago, I took that up there a couple of times and it was neat.

Swent: Oh, beautiful country.

Wilder: Yes. I mean, it's just slow. Chug, chug, chug. And you wonder, why do you go so slow? You look out and you go, "Oh, my God, slow down!" It's spectacular. But Island Mountain has a copper mine up there. It still has about 35,000 ounces of gold recorded still in the ground there. Well, that's interesting.

Island Mountain Copper Company. But it's just a theory. And that Peter Steen made me feel pretty good because he said, "That's exactly what I'm saying, is that right in this area there's more mines." But nobody can see under the ground.

A geologist told me that, and a good one, too, Fran Fredericks. He told me, "Hey, I can't see any further under the ground than you can." He says, "You can see just as far as I can. I can come up with all kinds of theories."

That drilling goes to show me one thing, that all the drilling Homestake did, they're a little bit off on the baseline. They're like this and Knox's is like that. And Knox's is the truer of the two, I think.

Swent: He was right.

Wilder: He didn't drill it. Now, how the devil did he do it?

Swent: Only heaven knows.

Wilder: I think a bunch about that. I don't know how. The guy didn't have a ouija board or something. It's an old saying of miners, "He's got a nose for ore."

Swent: Yes, that's what old George Hearst was supposed to have had.

Wilder: Yes, exactly right.

Swent: They said he had a fantastic nose for ore.

Wilder: Ken Jones bought me a book about Miller-Lux. You know Miller Lux cattle ranches?

Swent: Right.

Wilder: Okay, they had a meeting over in Walker Lake. George Hearst and Richard F. Knox and Miller, I believe it was, over there. And the guy who wrote the book is talking. It's a pretty factual thing. And he's talking about this meeting they had over there that's concerning mining. And Knox was pretty sharp. He [the author] is talking about this meeting over a campfire at this meeting. He said, "Knox wasn't feeling too good because he got kicked by a horse the night before." And that was this Richard F. Knox. I read this book that Ken Jones bought and I went, "God, almighty. Isn't that amazing to run into that."

A Hundred Years of Mining History in the Knoxville District

Swent: They were together a hundred years ago.

Wilder: Yes, that there was a connection there. And this mine was not just Knox. Osborn was a partner in the furnaces. But there was Levi Stevens and Caleb Hobbs, John Redington, Horatio Livermore, which is still around, see. The Livermores didn't know that. I

was talking to them once. "I believe your, it must have been your great grandfather, was a partner out there."

"I never knew that."

I said, "Yes. It's recorded. I've got his name on a signature, Horatio Livermore."

Levi Stevens was the president of the Mercantile Bank of California or something in Sacramento. I happened to find an old newspaper in an antique store and I'm reading. And it says California Mercantile Bank or something. I have that paper someplace. And it said President Levi Stevens and I went, "God, now I know where this is going, see, because Knox's office, Lake Mining Company was in California Street in San Francisco. So, then you kind of go, "Wow, I think it was 100 California Street or something. So, it's not too far from where Homestake is, even, see." So you kind of put this together and you go, "God, this is fascinating how this thing was not a little rinky dink thing in its day. It was a--"

Swent: A big thing.

Wilder: Yes, it was fairly prominent, see. And the way it looks like in this articles of incorporation for Lake Mining Company, John Redington went to Knoxville. That was Redington out of Virginia City. They were druggists up there. They sold mercury to the mines.

Then Levi Stevens at the bank--Livermore, Horatio Livermore went over to the Oat Hill mine. So, wait a minute. All of a sudden, the partners in here are pretty big in the mercury business. When you look at it now--

Swent: That's what brought them there.

Wilder: Yes, I mean, they're successful. They have Knoxville, the Oat Hill. I don't know what other ones. You'd have to really do more research. I said, "This is amazing." And old Knox was a pretty sharp guy. He had to be. George Hearst was pretty amazing. George Hearst's wife was in one.

Swent: Phoebe.

Wilder: Yes. Okay, and her secretary was Dr. McLaughlin's mother.

Swent: That's right.

Wilder: Yes, and that's another one, see. Lead [South Dakota, location of Hearst's Homestake Mine, discovered in 1876] was done dead in the water, had another year's ore. That's one of the things, you know, when you hear things, you think they're old but they die hard. Okay, Lead was done in 1901, you know, in 1902.

Swent: Still going.

Wilder: Yes. Now, that's interesting, isn't it? How could it be dead? All the geologists confirmed it was dead. It has another year's ore and it's all through. The thing's still going. That's pretty interesting. And I think those geologists were just as smart as the geologists today. Today we like to say, "Well, we have all this modern technology," which sometimes clouds the issue. Brain is the technology.

Swent: And work.

Wilder: Machines do not have intelligence. They take somebody's intelligence and can enlarge on it, maybe. I'm digressing here.

Swent: I think maybe it's about time for us to quit. I forgot all about lunch but it's getting pretty late.

[break for lunch]

Swent: What about the Gambles?

Wilder: Oh, they're good friends; Launce [Gamble].

Swent: That was a shame that they tore down that old building.

Wilder: Well, it was and it wasn't. If you're in Launce's shoes, I'd say it was a good move. Launce is a good businessman. George is not a businessman; George is a cowboy.

Swent: He's a rancher, a cattleman.

Wilder: And Launce is--I respect him. When I have problems, and I do have some that I can't seem to get an attorney to move on the right direction, I talk to Launce and I get an attorney that's a different attorney and all of a sudden, boy, this--like Miller, Starr, & Regalia down in Oakland on some land stuff. I had problems. I was using Pete. And Pete's a nice guy.

Swent: Pete Windham, up here, you said,

Wilder: Yes. But he's kind of not getting there. I got Miller, Starr, & Regalia and holy smokes! In a week's time they got Pete so shook

up he can't think straight and we got everybody nervous because all of a sudden, this is the way the law is and we're going for this and this and this. Everybody says, "Oh, let's talk about this. Let's settle it. Let's not get into this." And before that, they were saying, "Don't you fool with us, you know, we're Safeway and we play games." And this is where you learn. I file a law suit because they'd come over thirty feet on my property, put in a fill, plant trees on it, and they put their parking lot right on the property line because it's ten foot higher than mine. They're thirty feet over on my side. And so I tell them, you know, "Do something with this."

"We don't have to do anything with it." And they dig a big hole, take a permit out in another property, dig a hole over here. And I'm stuck with it and I can't do anything about it because they said, "Don't fool with us."

When I filed the law suit, they said, "Ah, ha, let's get out of here." They sell it to PERS which is Public Employees Retirement System.

Suddenly I'm in court. Now the judge is looking at me and I'm suing PERS, by the way. "Oh, no. It was Safeway two days ago."

"Well, they sold it to PERS. That's who you're suing now."

The bailiff is even looking at me like, you're trying to take my pension, you know. I'm not trying to do anything. I'm just trying to keep my land, here, see. So anyhow, this thing goes along. We finally get this thing pretty well settled and they win some points. The judge says, "Well, you're going to have to take care of it, take care of the trees and everything and it's on your land so you're going to have to do this. But you can't take it away because they have the right to use it."

"What right? Nobody gave them any right."

"Well, I'm giving them rights. This was a bad decision."

So I got Miller, Starr, & Regalia and boy, they did fine. But the funny thing was, when we get to that point, all of a sudden, the suit is all over. Guess what happened? PERS sells the thing back to Safeway. Suddenly, wait a minute; I'm suing-- "No, PERS isn't involved in this. Now it's Safeway." Now wait a minute, if this isn't subterfuge and bait and switch advertising practically.

I said, "Ah, now I know."

Miller, Starr, & Regalia is a big enough law firm that they went, "Uh, oh. This is not going to be easy now, see. They're going to do something that's going to really cost us some dough and we could lose and get a big black eye. Let's settle this." So then, "Now let's talk." Before that, for two years, they wouldn't talk. "We'll bury them." The city told me that, too. "Don't you fool with us. We'll bury you in legal fees."

So I was stupid enough, I said, "Well, let's just find out."

Finally, they said, "This is World Savings, the County of Lake, Flood Control [District]." All these people were all involved on the other side.

I would go into the court room, Pete Windham and myself and Don Hartford was actually my attorney, who was Pete's partner. Jess Jackson has Kendall Jackson Wines; that's his son-in-law, see. I know Don's real good and Jess's daughter is a nice gal.

This thing boggles your mind. We'd go to court and we're sitting there and there's about twenty-five lawyers on the other side. I went, "Man, Pete, it looks like this is David and Goliath there, for sure, you know." But anyhow, thank God I didn't. This thing gave me some stature because I had the money to pay the bills. I wasn't supposed to be able to do that.

Swent: So you're still out looking for another mine?

Wilder: Oh sure. Yes, I think there's some more around. I know it. And we've done some exploration, a little bit, nothing big, break rocks and look and that's what's going to really tell it.

VIII BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL MERCURY RECOVERY PLANT ECONOMICALLY

The Zodiac Adit of the Manhattan Named for a Famous Killer

Swent: Where was the Gale pit?

Wilder: That's right in the center of it. I can point it out on the face there.

Swent: And then the Zodiac?

Wilder: Zodiac we named because we discovered--I had the guys working out there. I had Joe Kafka from the Almaden up on a dozer. I said, "Well, Joe, be careful. Don't cover the portal of this adit that was across from where I lived. It may be 500 feet. But don't cover it because I want to get in and do some mapping on that thing." Sent him up on the top, pushing this thing, getting the road across there. What do you think happens? He covers the portal, naturally. This is rock, big pile of rock over there.

We let it go for I guess maybe four or five months, three months, something like that, hard to remember, now. But anyhow, I said, "Damnit, I want to get in there, see what it looks like." So we had a boom truck and we put a tire in the hoist, you know, and then they'd lower me down the shaft, these vertical shafts about a hundred and fifty feet high, see. They just dropped you down the shaft and the guy's looking, you know, watching you. You tell him, "Okay, stop." So I got down to the level on that to the shaft and then I went in backwards, see.

God, I crawled in through a couple of little tunnels and got into the main--there was a stope in there. It was a pretty good size, I remembered. I got in there and I went, "Holy smokes." I went, "Wow, somebody's been living in here." Because I mean, they had seats set up, a little table and all this stuff and a place for a bathroom. I went, "Oh, my God. We buried the guy. We

pushed that rock over. We buried a guy alive here." I went, "Oh, my God, the guy's obviously dead after three months."

I ran through there. I had a carbide light on my head and I went through there with that, looking and looking. I couldn't find it. Nothing. Found some dead rattlesnakes, you know. They'd been there and one of them was not too old. That's what scared me. When I found that I went, "Wow." I took a stick--

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Swent: You found the snake that had been killed by a rock.

Wilder: By a rock and it was still fresh, maybe a day old. I went, "Wow, somebody is still alive down here." So then I rushed around a little bit and I crawled back out to the shaft and I hollered, "Hey, come on down, Tom." Tom Austin came down on the tire. Then stepdaughter Patty came down on the tire. So it was the three of us down there and we really searched everything out. We found another way where the guy was getting in and out. He came out up in a pile of brush up there, right in the middle of everything and you'd never even see him. He was only a couple, not over 500 feet from the house. He'd been living in there. We found a grocery list. Reading the thing it looked like it was a guy and a girl living in there. But the bad part was at that time, this guy Zodiac had killed somebody up there at the lake. He had almost killed somebody there but he'd killed some other ones. Remember the Zodiac?

Swent: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Wilder: So, holy smokes! I found a grocery list. I was reading two magazines on a Saturday about a week after. I was reading this thing and it's a sample of his handwriting, you see, from a library in Santa Ana, I believe, or some place right around there. I look at this thing. They knew it was his writing. So, I got the grocery list and I went, "Holy smokes! The guy's writing is the same."

So we got word to the sheriff and boy, the sheriff came up from Napa County and the sheriff came from Lake County. They looked at them. Bob Leighty was the sheriff from Napa. He said, "God, let me take this." So they ran them. He said, "No, the handwriting expert said, 'Boy, they are close,'" because he looked at it and he said, "These are the same." The handwriting expert said, "No." Okay.

But then the guy from Lake County said, "Let me see this. I want to take this. I want to go all through there with them."

They went down through the garbage and pit. They had a little pit that was a shaft that had caved in. They used that for the garbage pit. So he went down there. We brought a ladder in and let him down. I was pretty excited. But we called it the Zodiac after that, see.

Swent: I can imagine you were really nervous.

Wilder: Oh, yes. I mean, I go, "All this time. We're living right here for--"

Swent: And you had no idea they were there.

Wilder: Didn't know it. Didn't have the faintest idea.

Swent: They must have had a car somewhere.

Wilder: They--no, I think they just up and, you know, walked.

Swent: They walked in and out.

Wilder: Well, walk in and out, yes. Yes, I wouldn't drive a car in there. No, because you couldn't come in the gate. Then, you were fair game. If you were in there with a car, you'd be caught right out.

Swent: Could they walk all the way to Clear Lake?

Wilder: Don't know what the heck they did there. I don't know. There used to be some people bumming along, bumming a ride.

Swent: Yes, you said you had some problems with people that came up and--

Wilder: Oh, they'd generally drive in a car and they got a couple of rifles and they're at the gate and they tell me, "Hey, I'm coming in here."

And I tell them, "You're not coming in here."

"I got a rifle." They had that rifle, you know. "You're going to eat that rifle in about two hot seconds." I used to get some of these things and I'd get pretty mad and I would do something stupid. I'd tell them, "Hey, take that rifle and stick it down your throat," or something. I don't know. It was kind of funny. You hope you've played hard guy, you know. You have to just stay light.

Swent: You have to be your own law up here, didn't you?

Wilder: Yes, well, it was kind of funny because Patty and her husband--that was my stepdaughter--they were in a one-side argument with some guys that were going through. I've had rifles. I don't use a gun ever. I don't need to, you know. But I pulled up in my pickup. It was at night and I'd just come in from some pretty long run, something like down Planada or something, come up and I just turned in and I got them right in the headlights. They're standing there arguing. Now, they got Steve and Patty on this side and me on the other side. He'd go, "What are you doing with the guns?" And the guy says, "Oh!" He'd put them down. They'd both put the guns on these concrete blocks and got way far away from the guns because they didn't know what was going to happen.

"Hey, what's the problem?"

"Well, we want to go back there."

"No, you don't. This is mine. You don't go back there."

"Oh. We thought this was a public road."

"No. It's a very private road. See that gate? That's it."

"Oh, sorry, sir." And they were gone.

Swent: And away they go.

Wilder: Yes. That's the way it worked. It was pretty good because Patty and Steve were there, me here, and they were in between. So, it makes it where they are turning back and forth. They don't know--

Swent: Did you ever have any trouble getting your mercury out with people holding you up for that?

Wilder: Mercury--I never really got--they did hold up the guy up here at the outlet. They tied up the fireman on the furnace and then stole the mercury. They went down to Mountain View to a warehouse and they tied up the watchman down there and stole the mercury there because mercury, that's $700 a flask. Boy, you've got a--

Swent: And you were shipping it out in flasks, mostly.

Wilder: Oh, yes. And I'd haul them out myself. I talked to Bob Leighty, the sheriff, some and he said, "Well, let me know when you're coming down and I'll try and meet you halfway or something."

"I got no phone, Bob." I had a CB radio. You could if you could get somebody, I could CB him. But that didn't come till later, basically.

So, anyhow, I just put the mercury in my GMC. I had a GMC then and I moved them in the back behind the seat. I had maybe ten, fifteen flasks which is a pretty good chunk of weight. Then, the GMC was fairly heavy and I'd just say, "Well, now some guy's going to pull his car out and say stop." He just bit the bullet because he's going to be dead by the time I get about four feet through him. I wouldn't stop for somebody. Not--no way. I mean, I've told Bob that, too. If somebody's trying to stop me, Bob, they're in trouble because I'll run right into him before I'd stop. I'd just keep going, push them into the creek or something. I mean, that's just survival and I'm not afraid of that. He said, "That's the way to do it."

We never really had a lot of problems. We had a few guys challenge us on that but nothing. A sheriff would come up and generally--sometime, we were not sure if it was going to be a hard time. But a guy around the town says a guy's going to do me in or something. I just told him, "Get out of here." He went down and punched a gal. The guy that was married to, what was her name? Aleen Strep. She was married to Mike Strep. That's a little bit of history.

One Brief Brush with the Law

Wilder: I got some wedding invitations from Swift. I can't remember the initials. Swift and his wife. They got married on the Manhattan. I don't remember the date but I got three or four of these invitations, in 1888. This must have been in 1978. Yes, 1978. Mike Streb and Aleen Streb which would be ninety years later. They got married on it and Judge Freeborne, here, was a justice court judge then. He came out and married them. Then he became a lawyer, wasn't in justice court. Now, he's a superior court judge up there.

Swent: For heaven sakes.

Wilder: Yes, Dick Freeborne is a good guy. I like him. But it's kind of funny that--

Swent: They came back and wanted to be married in the same place.

Wilder: Well, yes, this was--he worked for me, Mike and Aleen. They got married up here, just ninety years later, roughly, to the day. So, then, anyhow, her husband was from San Jose and he was upset because they were divorced. But he came up and was, one day--it was fairly early in the morning. He'd been in a bar and got

pretty well loaded, I guess, and came in and went down. They lived around the corner there. He went up and was hollering at her and then he hauled off and punched her, knocked her down.

Mike was on the furnace. He could look right down the canyon and see his house. He saw her get knocked down and that really upset him. So he hotfooted it down there with rubber boots on, not very good. The guy jumped in his car and drove away. But something he said made me think he's coming back.

So we had it all arranged. As I said, this is a crew that's tight. It was Chris Kent, who still lives in town. Chris says, "Okay, I'll--" He was on wash down and stuff, plant maintenance. Chris said, "I'll go over and take the furnace, Mike, if that guy shows up again and you're free. You're off on your own." And Russ Turney was up working up in the bone yards, said, "I'll keep an eye open." I mean, everybody had these things. I was up on a blade up in the Gale pit as a matter of fact.

So, jeez, they come up and got me. The guy had showed up and got down there but he didn't expect Mike to be, except for Mike was down there and flattened the guy. The guy got up and he had a partner with him who was a detective or something. And I--how did that happen? Oh, Chris Kent got down there then. Somebody covered for Chris and Chris put the detective back in the car and told him, "You'd better get out before you get hurt or something." The guy left. This other guy that Mike had punched, ran away up through the hills, you know. Oh, my God.

I said, "Hey, all these guys are working. I'm paying these guys. Get back to work. Forget about this. I'll take care of it." So then I went out trying to get this guy to come in. I said, "Come in. I'll take you in the car and I'll drive you into town. I'm not going to hurt you. Don't worry." This guy won't come in. He runs away from me. He's got an orange jacket on. I can remember that. I said, "Come over. I'm not going to bother you, you know." He won't do that. He just keeps running around the mountain top there and he disappears. Fine. I'm not going to chase this guy everywhere. He goes down the canyon.

And somebody, well, his partner drove into town and told them they're going to murder a guy out there. Holy smokes. So, the Lake County sheriff calls the Napa County sheriff and tells him, you know, we've got a big thing happening. There was nothing happening, just me out there talking to this guy trying to get him to come in. He runs down the road and he sees the police car, sheriff's car. He runs out and says, "They're trying to kill me. There's a guy chasing me."

Jeez, they come up here and I said, "Wow, they've got siren and lights on and everything." I thought, wow. Now what have we got, you know. This guy's sitting in the back and he said, "Yes, that guy." I've been doing nothing, you know. I got in a big row with the guy anyhow. But it worked out. The guys, they left and they never came back.

Nobody ever came back and the sheriff came up. Bucky Stewart said, "Hey." I don't know. That guy's name was Goldberg or something. That was the sheriff that came up here and Bob was on vacation, the normal sheriff. This guy didn't know anything. Boy, he was going to give me a real hard time. I told him, you stay over that side of the line. You don't have any warrant. You don't have any rights here. This is mine. That's yours. You can't do this. But there was a ranger from down on the lake and he said, "I think you better cool it because, you know."

Swent: This fellow was the girl's former husband?

Wilder: Yes, and he was really intent on doing some bad things to her. So, this worked out. She and Mike Streb had been married here, Mike and her. But this former husband was a rumdum. That was his big claim to fame, was he could stay drunk longer than anybody else.

The Mercury Mining and Recovery Operation

Swent: I'd like to have you tell me about your mercury operation. You had the Gale pit and you also had underground workings.

Wilder: Oh, yes, but we didn't do any underground mining. It was all open pit.

Swent: There were a lot of adits there.

Wilder: Oh, there was a lot of underground workings. I bet you there were fifty miles of them.

Swent: You didn't mine any of the underground ones?

Wilder: Well, there was no real reason to. As long as you can work an open pit it's a lot cheaper.

Swent: Sure.

Wilder: And you see with the small quantities, running a retort or something like Charlie Wilson and Hickox--they ran a little retort. They'd run 500 pounds a day at the most; then you can work underground. But when you're trying to feed a furnace that's going to burn a hundred tons a day, there's no way. I'd have to have a hundred guys underground mining.

Swent: The furnace was outdoors, essentially?

Wilder: No, it was in the mill building. There was a crushing section up on the hill above the San Quentin and a big conveyor went down cross country and down across the road and then into the lower bin that was--

The Crushing Plant

Swent: What sort of distance is that? How long was your conveyor?

Wilder: Hmmm. It must have been three, four hundred feet.

Swent: Oh, quite a ways.

Wilder: Yes, it was a pretty long way.

Swent: You crushed up by the pit?

Wilder: Yes, we crushed up in the San Quentin. Then it went down into a bin. We fed it into a bin, went through a pan feeder onto the belt, a short belt. And into the scalping screen and a jaw crusher.

Swent: What kind of crusher did you have?

Wilder: Kueken. A Kueken jaw, yes. Let's see, and a scalping screen. Then it dropped onto the conveyor. It went across the road and we had a--I think that was about a four- or five-hundred-ton bin. We had a big bin.

Swent: What was your conveyor made of?

Wilder: Oh, that was made from an old one and was all steel. The troughing rolls and everything, I don't know what brand they were, now that I think about it. It was custom actually because what we had was what we used.

Swent: You put stuff together that was there.

Wilder: Oh, yes. It was a pretty good conveyor. The gear motor and everything was all pretty good stuff. The crusher and screens; we had a Simplicity screen, which is good stuff. The feeder--I'm trying to remember what that pan feeder was. It was one that came from Kaiser's out there at the port in Redwood. That's another thing. Kaiser, when they closed the operation in Redwood City, and moved everything to Antioch, they gave me the Redwood City plant.

Swent: Did they?

Wilder: Yes, because I'd been there about twenty years. See, when we were up here, when they had a ship coming in, they made contact with us and I moved a crew down there for the one day or day and a half; then I came back up here. We used about fifteen trucks down there. I hired local trucks so we'd do the ship unloading and then come back up here. So after about twenty years, Kaiser said, "Jeez, we're going to get out of there." They said, "Give it to Bill. He's been here before us." So it was pretty good. It was a good thing.

Swent: So then you had the conveyor that took it down?

Wilder: Through the big bin.

Swent: Through another bin.

Wilder: Yes, that was a big bin. That was a four hundred, five hundred ton, maybe I think we even put up as high as six, seven hundred tons. I had a building over it. We'd fill it right up on the building as high as we could get a cone to go over. Then it went down from there.

Designing a Screw Feeder that Worked Without Compacting

Wilder: It originally had a bump feeder, a standard Gould bump feeder, which was a man-killer. It was no good because it would plug up with the stuff and build and you'd have to get some poor old guy down there with a long bar and a chisel and this thing is gassing. I used to do that because I'd feel sorry for some of the old guys I had, like Bill Nelson, or something. Heck, he's sixty-eight years old and he's trying to do this and he can't hardly get around, see. So I'd go down and clean it up for him.

Then I said, "This is ridiculous." So I made a new feeder, my own design. And it worked like real slick and they said, "That won't work. We spent thousands of dollars and it won't work."

And I go, "I've done a little different wrinkle here." And it did work.

It worked really good and that shocked them because it's a pretty logical thing. If you take a spiral screw, you know, and a pipe and you put ore in here, the screw conveyor, going to push the stuff through and drop it in the furnace. Beautiful. It's sealed.

Swent: Like an old meat grinder.

Wilder: That's it. Sausage stuffer. The only thing, a sausage is one thing. But now we put clay in here and we put it into a furnace that's running about 2200 degrees. What happens to this clay, mud and clay? It turns into a briquette, only one great big--like the sausage got set up, turned into concrete, see. I said, "Hmmm." I thought about it because Gould told me he spent thousands of dollars at the Helen [Mine]. "We twisted off shafts that big; it won't work."

"Now, wait a minute."

Well, I thought, well, okay. The problem is it's compacting it. It's pushing. It's the same thing. How about if I take one and it's got a real slow screw here, you know, real close together. And then it gets bigger and faster so that you put in one cupful here but you take away two cupfuls. You can't compact it. It can't cook because you're going faster all the time. It's moving it away faster than it can get in there. It can't compact. And nobody thought of this, really. I made this thing, this spiral thing, and put it in. It worked like a million dollars. Nobody ever had to clean the feeder.

Making An Automatic Control for the Conveyor

Wilder: And I made a little spring-loaded trap so if we got a rock in there, the pinch point would change and would drop the rock one side or the other. I got a little short conveyor off a trenching machine with a photoelectric cell across it. So that took the feed from the bin and it ran it up and dropped it into this little hopper in the screw. Now, when the ore got filled up in the pipe on the screw, it cut off the light and the conveyor stopped. When

the ore went down, the light shined, the conveyor turned on, filled it up again. It worked, and it was all stuff we already had. There was no money involved at all. The whole thing didn't cost $200, see.

Swent: But a lot of ingenuity.

Wilder: Oh, yes. And a bunch of "do with what you got," see. Well, that's why the bone yard was an important part of this thing. But it worked so damn good. I haven't seen anybody yet. But Mike came up and he said, "Hey, I can't believe it."

Swent: Mike? Who is Mike?

Wilder: Mike Fopp. He was the engineer for Gordon Gould and then he was the owner of Gordon Gould. He said, "God, that--click, click, click. Do you mind if I use this idea on things?" He said, "On design," because he designed plants all over the world for Almaden, Spain and stuff, see. Click, click, click. Pictures.

"Go ahead, Mike." This is something I came up with. It's pretty good. It worked.

Designing a Fiberglass Condenser

Wilder: Then another one was--we had--oh, desperate times at the Manhattan. The condensers, the new pipes we had were steel. They're good for, at the very best, two years and they cost about 80,000 bucks, which--well, $80,000 is like saying the moon; I could have took a moon shot easier.

Swent: The condenser comes after your furnace?

Wilder: Yes, this is the condenser, but this happened before we made the feeder. These pipes started to eat holes. The standard practice is when it gets a hole in it, the gas is coming out so you put a fiberglass patch on it. Pretty soon, this whole thing is fiberglass and then a section falls out that big. Well, you make a big fiberglass bandage around this thing and try and plug it and keep running. Well, eventually, the condenser is so full of holes it looks like Swiss cheese. Worse than Swiss cheese. So, wow, what am I going to do here? I don't have the money and the partners will not put no money into this thing.

I was looking in a Montgomery Ward's catalog and I said, "Hmm, fiberglass. What about if we buy roofing sheets, you know."

And we bought what they had. There were this wide and green, yellow, black, every color of the rainbow. We put them around there and wrapped wire around them and then fiberglassed a strip down the joint, see. Kay worked on that; Patty worked--everybody. All the wives and everybody were out there standing forty feet up in the air on a little plank; ping! It makes it where you've got people together, see. It worked after a fashion; it kept us running. But not good. I mean, not a good system.

Finding Bondo an Economical Adhesive for Fiberglass

Wilder: I couldn't get the fiberglass to stick to these sheets. You could just grab it and peel it off. It was like gluing something on here and then you pull it and it comes right off like tape. No good. How can I bond it? I asked around and went to adhesive outfits. A guy comes up. "We've got an adhesive that will positively stick and it's only $250 a gallon."

And I went, "Oh, jeez. We're dead there, see."

And then I ran into somebody, someplace. I can't remember who gave me the lead on that. Said, "Why don't you call this guy?" He gave me his name. "He works for Lockheed down in Burbank and he was on a space capsule deal, a space thing where they're using these fiberglass sandwiches, you know, honeycomb structures. He knows more about bonding fiberglass than anybody I know. He's a fairly young guy and he's sharp."

I called this guy and he said, "Yes."

And I said, "Jeez, maybe you can help me. I'm trying to bond fiberglass, you know, roofing sheets and I'm just not having any luck at all."

And he says, "Oh, that's very easy. Sand it or sandblast it and then use Bondo."

"Not resin or anything?"

"No, no. Just use regular body-and-fender Bondo. That's what we use on this honeycomb stuff."

I can't believe it.

He says, "Yes, you have to clean it, though, get the wax off of it by sandblasting or sanding it. Put it on, put them together."

So I tried it and I could not believe it. I put them together with Bondo, gave them a couple of hours, went out and pulled and it just ripped the fiberglass sheet all to pieces but it did not break the bond.

So then I got hold of an outfit that made hothouse sheets; they'll make them to any length. I can't remember the name of that outfit. But I had them make these sheets nineteen foot, six inches long.

I figured out something. These corrugated roof panels and they make one fifty-two and a half inches which gives, if I'd overlap them one corrugation, it gives me a sixteen-inch pipe, see, the same as sixteen inches in diameter. But now, if you take a measure of this thing, if you took it and laid it out flat and rolled it out, it would be the same as a twenty-two-inch pipe. That's what it was, twenty-two, which you had the surface of a twenty-two with a diameter of a sixteen which gives you enough velocity so that it scrubs and all that--it was moving fairly quick so it kind of scours itself.

And it has the surface to cool it because that was like Mike said, "Bill, that won't work; everybody's tried fiberglass pipes."

I said, "I know it." And they cost like heck.

And he said, "They won't condense because it's like trying to get hot air to get cool by putting a piece of asbestos in between. It's hot here and it's still hot when it goes out 500 foot later."

I thought, that's not right. I said, "Mike, what would happen if I built a house and I used these roofing sheets a thirty-thousandth of an inch thick? What would happen if I used them for the walls? What would happen in the wintertime?"

"Oh, it would get cooler than hell."

"How about the summer?"

"It would get hot as heck."

"Hmm. What would happen if I put them thirty-thousandths for a pipe on a condenser?"

"Well, you can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, it will just fall apart."

"Not if it's corrugated. It has some stiffness, see."

"Hmm. Well, nobody's tried that. I've never thought of that."

So we made them. And he did. He looked and he said, "Damn, you've got a good idea." And it did work.

Swent: You didn't have any pipe inside at all. It was just these?

Wilder: Just these. We made pipes right out of it. I still have the jig even, with the board in it and we take these sheets and the guy would put a piece of wood. We'd rip it down into a two-by-two redwood, laid in the length of this thing. It was twenty-two foot long. And the sheets were nineteen-six. We'd lay the sheet up there and drive a couple of stainless nails into this board and then fold it around and we'd sandblast both edges that were going to go together and put the Bondo right on down there, bring this over and then drive some stainless steel boat nails in it to hold it while the Bondo set. And then take that one off and stack it up and start another one. We made a whole big pile of these.

Then we'd take the tube and put them on there--it was twenty-two feet long and the pipes were only nineteen. So we made a little support and we'd bring the pipes and start one inside the other, sandblast it, both surfaces, shove it back here and shove one inside the other and then push it down, put the Bondo in there, turn it and do the same thing. And the inside one would go, boink, and it'd be tight. Now we got a forty-foot-long pipe. It worked great. It was perfect. I've still got some of the pipes and they are. That was why I said no money makes a big difference. If I had money, I'd have said, "Oh, get some company to do it."

Swent: So this is what you condensed your mercury vapor in. You've gotten through the furnace.

Wilder: Through the furnace. It went through--

Swent: It comes out of your big bin into the furnace.

Wilder: Into the furnace and the rock goes through the furnace. It takes about an hour and twenty minutes to get through it.

Swent: Is it a horizontal furnace?

Wilder: Yes, it's a rotary kiln.

Swent: A rotary kiln, okay.

Wilder: Okay, because the time it goes in till it comes out--

Swent: Where is your fuel burning?

Wilder: Oh, at the end, on the discharge end. You're feeding at the cold end and it's pitched downhill. We had about three feet in sixty-five. That's the angle that we ran. About three foot lower on this end. This thing turns. You feed it in there. To go that sixty-five feet and drop out took about an hour and ten minutes, something like that, roughly.

Swent: I was thinking that you had flame all along the top like a broiler. But you don't.

Wilder: Oh, no. You've got a flame down the end, a burner that's throwing fire all the way up the whole length of that kiln, just about. You can juggle it. It generally impinges down here where the ore was rolling over. As the kiln turns this way, it would come up and curls over. Right about in there you'd hit the flame. We had a Hauck burner which is a big burner like that.

Swent: What?

Wilder: A Hauck burner. And this throws a flame, oh, twenty-five feet, something like that. It would be a real big flame. I mean, it will melt the furnace if you were not careful. It gets the brick and everything red hot all the way up there, quite a ways up, see.

Swent: So by the time it comes down the sixty-five feet it's a liquid?

Wilder: Oh, no. That's the dangerous part. If you overheat it, you go to sleep, your rock starts to turn into a liquid and this is what you call lava, basically.

Swent: And you don't want that.

Wilder: No. This is what you call a clinker because then all of a sudden, you look in there and you go, "My God, what am I seeing?" You see a big red, glowing red rock with a little hole in the center. This thing is like a donut only molted rock. And it seems to glaze on the surface. And inside, if you take a bar and break it, there would be pieces of rock glowing red on the inside. But it has a molted coating all the way over it. And this is a killer. I mean, this just--you get it out of there because if you don't,

oh, you'll spend your life in there chipping away to get this thing out of there like concrete once it's set.

Swent: What is it that you really want, when it's ideal?

Wilder: Well, you want it to get hot because mercury dissociates itself, supposedly, at 1350. We would run it up to about 2,000 so that there would be no light places. The mercury would be all driven out of the rock.

Swent: It's a vapor.

Wilder: That was a vapor. Now, we inhale the vapors on the same end as we're feeding it. You're feeding it here but you're pulling the vapors up that way. And the hot rock goes down and drops on the other end. And so this end here, you're pulling a draft there because you have what was called a hot fan. It was a big blower up there that's sucking on that end of the furnace. You feed in there and you have a dust collector, so that any dust is bypassed.

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Swent: You've got your rotary kiln going slightly down, three feet down, your flame going up.

Wilder: Going up.

Swent: Your gases going up, waste rock dropping down into there.

Wilder: Going down into the hot rock bin, yes, which is twenty-eight feet.

Cogeneration of Heat

Swent: And that's just waste.

Wilder: That's waste rock but it's glowing red hot. Now you use that as a source of heat, this red hot rock down there. You're on an insulated bin. You're standing on a bin that's glowing inside. I mean, you look down there and it looked like you're looking into hell. [laughter] Wow! Impressive. I mean, glowing bright red.

Swent: Two thousand degrees.

Wilder: Yes. That's right. But the gas or the air going in we'd regulate from the corner of the bin so it pulls it through there. If

there's anything sweating out of the rock, I mean, mercury vapors or anything. But the biggest thing is you're heating the air up so that the air we will pull into that furnace is up right around 2,000 degrees. That means we don't burn fuel for that. Pull that on up and it goes through a cyclone that pulls the dust out of it, if there's any dust.

Then it goes from the cyclone to the hot fan, then on out into the condensers. It's split. There's a manifold that split it. There's 480 feet of pipe on each side, of sixteen-inch pipe that goes up and down and up and down. At the top you have a washout. At the bottom you have a cone, like that, with a bucket on it or a launderer that was under water so it's all sealed for gas so that you can't get any mercury vapors floating around. Then we went from there.

Swent: And this is your fiberglass pipe.

Wilder: That's it. And we had these jazzy launderers where we didn't have to handle the mercury. We just went in there and the guy would squeegee it down to the end. Then we pumped it with a big mud pump into a sand screw where it was cleaned up. Then it built up a great big pool; it reached a certain height, and it would run over and into a big tank. That's where we found this out with big production on this reclaiming batteries.

Reclaiming Mercury from Batteries: a Lucrative Business

Wilder: Nobody realized how much, but you know what we were doing on those? This was spectacular. Our best day was 22,000 pounds of mercury.

Swent: Wow!

Wilder: Twenty-two thousand pounds of mercury at, say around six or seven dollars a pound. Hey!

Swent: Pretty good day.

Wilder: Well, that's why I say people didn't understand that. We were doing more money in that than almost anybody around.

Swent: Where did you get the batteries from?

Wilder: Oh, we did this work for Mallory, for Duracell, P. R. Mallory.

Swent: They brought them into you.

Wilder: Oh, they'd ship them. We had a forty-foot trailer a day. That's when Homestake came up here. I told them, "Gee, we're busy." We had made one run for them, for Mallory. Then we said, "Okay, now we know the problems with handling this 22,000 pounds a day."

And they came out. They sent their plant superintendent out and looked it over, and he said, "Hey, Bill, you're doing good. You got a free hand on this thing. Do what you want." And he said, "You've documented every dime of our dough," because that was the deal--was that we make improvements for them, they foot the bill for the labor, just at the payroll cost and for the materials. And they said, "Fine. Anything we got--use our lab for any test you want or anything."

And then we got along so good--that was another, what would you call it, just good people. I thought they were great.

Swent: Where are they?

Wilder: Burlington, South Carolina. And they sent a professor out here. He lived with us for--oh, God, we were good friends. Tom Tomlinson, an Englishman, and Carl. But Tom was out here for--heck, a couple of months, stayed with us. And he was a professor of chemistry and a mining engineer from the Royal School of Mines. We got to be just awful good friends. And that was P. R. Mallory.

And Gunther was the head of the operations and Gunther was a good guy. He came out here and he understood the real working thing. Tom is a professor, not to be confused with somebody that even knows what they're doing on running a plant. [laughs] He was the bane of our life. He was great on the chemistry of what was happening, like Kunter, with Homestake. Did you ever meet him?

Swent: Dick Kunter?

Wilder: That's the guy who developed the autoclave idea. This is another one. He's not to be a logical guy. This guy is a genius, though. Now you read, "They put in an autoclave," like it's just--everybody has one.

I said, "Wait a minute. I remember when this thing was first being talked about and they did those tests over in Africa." Do you remember? And Homestake was the first one in it.

And everybody was kind of going, "Ha, ha, ha. Wait till they bite the bullet on this one." And it worked so good. Now

everybody's got it and they talk like, well, Homestake didn't have anything to do with it.

I say, "Baloney. They were the ones who put it together. And he was the one who did it." I said, "I think they'd have had him executed if it would have failed." [laughs] I mean, because the amount of dough that went into that thing. Oh, my God.

Swent: A lot. Yes, a lot. So let's finish the mercury. You had, you said, a sand filter? The mercury, when it came out and then you had to clean it?

Wilder: Oh, okay. Let's see. When it comes from the furnace, it goes up through the cyclone. From the cyclone into the condenser stands where it precipitates. But in case anything sneaks through there, a little dust or something, on the tail end of that, then, we had a Venturi scrubber, which is a high-pressure water system that hits any particulates and wets them and then drives them into a water column and they go down through a filter that we had that took all particulates out of it and settled them and then recirculated the water back to the Venturi.

The One Shot Plant Design in Decorator Colors

Swent: Oh, that's a very complicated system.

Wilder: I can tell you it's a One Shot design because it's pink--. Whenever we made a buy on paint, we'd go to a flea market and buy all the paint we could find; that's why you end up with pink things with black stripes. The two-by-fours are black and the plywood's green or pink or yellow or--I mean, goofy colors. It looked nice. I mean, it was something like Union Oil. Remember, Oleum [?] used to have pink, green, blue. It looked something like that because we got a buy on paint. But anyhow, I did that. It went through this drum filter and settled all the particulates. Then the water went back through the Venturi again. Then that went into a house.

It's still over here, as a matter of fact, at the ranch, there. It's a de-mister, which is a series of baffles with screens that are wetted by a pump and nozzles. De-mister means any mist that would be getting through with particulates is hit by these impingement plates which are wetted surfaces that--this is my own design again, surplus buys. We found this non-skid deck surface from the navy. It's an epoxy that you put down; it's a polyurethane paint and you put sand in it like it's little sharp

crystals so you don't skid, see, on the deck. Well, you put it on a plywood and it's a block impervious to acid.

And any dust hits it, it's just jagged like a barrel of fish hooks. So the dust builds up and then you just wash it off. Once you got it stopped, you wash it off into the bottom and settle it off into this tank again. It went from there. Then we put a stack on that. We went up about sixty feet in the stack and that had sprays in it. So coming out the end, all you have is steam. The way we always checked this is you put a clean copper piece up there and hang it in the stack. If you've got any mercury, it will immediate amalgamate with the copper. Put it up there and leave it up there for twenty-four hours and it wouldn't even have any mercury on it.

Successful Emission Control

Wilder: This is one that not a lot of people know. They laughed about that plant, maybe. But an outfit that the Bay Area Air Pollution [district] used was called Ultrachem. And they're in Concord. Ultrachem does emission testing to meet the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] guidelines, see. And nobody could pass the mercury guidelines except one plant in the whole damn country. That was right here. We had them up there. And I paid them actually for this test. And then Mallory reimbursed me for it after because I said, "Hey, we passed it."

They said, "You don't have any problems?"

I said, "No." They came up and they had a crew, this Ultrachem did. They stayed over for a twenty-four hour test, stayed here about a day and a half, something like that. And they gave me a letter, too, with the results of the test and everything.

Then I did have the Bay Area Air Pollution saying, "Oh, you couldn't have passed the test."

Yes, I did. Yes, I passed the test.

"Ha, ha. [sarcastically] Who did you use to run the test?"

And I said, "Ultrachem."

"Who?"

I said, "Ultrachem in Concord."

"Well, that's who we use."

I said, "I know. That's why I used them."

They went, "Hmm. You passed?"

I said, "Yes."

"We didn't think anybody could pass it."

I said, "Well, we did. It took a lot of work to do it but we did it." And we didn't run the thing a hundred and twenty tons a day. We kicked it back to about eighty tons. And I was pretty proud of that because then they can't say, "You're in violation of the air regulations." No, I'm not. We're in conformance with them, which was good. I was proud of that.

Swent: You should be.

Wilder: Yes, I mean, I didn't know one other, any other plant in the whole country that could do it. No one.

Legends about Mercury and Environmental Pollution

Swent: I've heard horror stories about the earlier mercury operations here, not yours. That the mercury was dripping from the trees.

Wilder: Oh, that sounds like somebody's making a story because, see, I've had guys tell me that from the Bureau of Mines or something about this. "Oh, yes, the mercury is just hanging off the trees."

And I tell them, "Hey, wait a minute. Let's get one thing straight. If the guy is running a mercury operation, what is he getting paid for?"

"Well, he's getting paid for mercury."

"Well, if he's got it dripping off the trees, the guy obviously is not getting it in the flask and I don't know of any miner that's that stupid." It's like having a gold mine and saying, "He polluted the creek. It's full of nuggets down there." The guy is not that goofy because that's what you're getting paid for, see. No, that's baloney.

Swent: They were saving every bit they could.

Wilder: But I had a guy come out here. As a matter of fact, that's interesting because Kay fixed him a tuna sandwich. [laughs] They were talking about the mercury and tuna. And this guy came up and looked at the trees and you know he--have you ever been at a thing where you go, "Oh, God, I thought this and maybe I'm wrong--" you kind of get panicky.

But the guy said, "Ha. I see you've killed all the trees." This is around the house.

And I went, "Well, you know, no."

And he says, "Yes, you have. Look at them. They're all dead. The leaves are all falling off."

I said, "No, it's fall." Jeez, I think fall means the leaves fall off, don't it? And I tell him, "Well, maybe I'm goofy." I felt like a fool, you know. So he went away. Kay fixed him a tuna sandwich.

Then he came back in the spring and he looked at his notes and he looked and he said, "Well, I can't believe it. I thought the trees were all dead. They've all got leaves on them."

I said, "No, they do that every year. The leaves fall off and then they get them back on. Some oak trees don't do that but these do."

He said, "I'll be darned. I thought you were telling me a lie."

"Come on in and have a tuna sandwich." [laughs] Kay did that and I give her credit. That was her job. That turkey was from back in Baltimore or some place. He knew about as much about this country as a fly.

Swent: Were any people ever damaged by mercury that you know of?

Wilder: I had one guy that got out of jail and I put him to work. He had worked down at Knoxville. Oh, my God, he was filthy. What they called him, Floyd the mamba. I mean, this guy was a grub. He lived in his car. He was filthy. And he'd stay boozed up, no good. Had him about two days and I think he was drinking mercury. But he said, "I don't feel good." He went in and got some tests and he was high on mercury.

So I took him off of work. "Don't do that. Go to the doctor."

The doctor said, "Well, he's a little high. He's going down." Monitored him for a week. There's nothing much. It just goes down.

We monitored ourselves all the time, like with Mallory. Every week, I got some urine bottles back to the labs back there and they'd run them on everybody, I mean, myself included. I'd keep score and we had a regular chart of everybody, where they were at all times. If somebody started getting a little bit elevated, moved him outside and moved somebody outside inside because in hot weather or something like that, if you're working in a place where there's spills or bottling mercury or something, well, you do have some fumes even with a respirator.

Swent: Yes, it's dangerous.

Wilder: And I'd catch guys like this Floyd, what he would do--he'd lay a cigarette down. There's mercury all over this thing. Lay a cigarette down, pick up and take a drag and put it down. His hands are full of mercury. I'd tell him, "Floyd, you can't do that. I don't want you doing that."

"Okay."

I'd go away and he'd do the same thing. So he only lasted, I think, about a week or two and that was the only guy I really had any problems with.

Swent: How many did you have employed in your plant?

Wilder: All together, I imagine in that mill and the mine there were about twenty people. We ran a high of thirty-five, I think. But most of the time, about twenty people--fifteen, twenty people.

Swent: You need somebody in the pit, miners.

Wilder: Yes, I need a couple people, three or four people in the pit hauling and crushing. I'd have one or two guys in the crusher feeding the bin and stuff. Then you have to have a foreman on each shift. That's three shifts. And you have to have a silver man for washing down on every shift.

Swent: What did you call him?

Wilder: A silver man.

Swent: A silver man? Why?

Wilder: Because he handles the silver. We call it silver. No, he doesn't look silver at all. [laughs]

Swent: Well, no, but I didn't think you were mining silver.

Wilder: No, no. That's what you call quicksilver. Instead of mercury, that was the term, quicksilver. So if you got fifteen flasks of silver, you know, that was quicksilver.

Swent: Oh, okay.

Wilder: And we would have one cleanup guy and he cleaned up around the mill. He went up and turned the valves on and washed out the pipes about every hour or so when we were running heavy like that. Then he'd have to make sure the lines were clear and watch the tank that it didn't overflow the tank. Move the line over so that they pump into the next tank. We had four of those tanks that held 22,000 pounds. At one time, we couldn't get trucks. It was a strike or something. We ended up, we had all 88,000 pounds in tanks and then we had--these flasks were 7,000-pound flasks. So, I think we had, holy smokes, another 120,000 pounds of this mercury in flasks. In these big flasks that we'd ship.

Efficiently Loading Twenty-Five Tons of Mercury

Wilder: Those are the regular trade flasks we shipped back to Mallory. We didn't handle it. It was too much work. It takes too much time. We used 7,000-pound flasks that we'd ship back and forth. So we're loading about twenty-five tons to a trailer. We'd load a trailer and that would be 50,000 pounds. They'd give us seven of those flasks. You couldn't move them when they're full. We'd leave empty ones in there and block them and spike them down. Then we ran a hose from the tank up above, down to the truck, a hydraulic hose with a high-pressure hydraulic valve and you'd put it in and turn it on and fill the flask up and move to the next one. It worked good.

This was all our own developed stuff. We found out how bad it was to handle those little flasks. You couldn't do 88,000 pounds in a day if your life depended on it. It's just physically impossible. I didn't know that until Morgan [North] ran that contract before us and it was terrible. He just was so--they just weren't set up for it and they didn't have the ingenuity to think of something else. So he quit.

Swent: Morgan?

Wilder: Morgan North. Morgan was a good friend. I liked Morgan, a very good guy. He and I could find something to fight over all the time but it was good. It was; I liked him a lot.

Swent: He must have been pretty young when he died, wasn't he?

Wilder: Yes, he was about the same age. No, I think he was older than I am. He'd be about seventy-three, seventy-four.

Swent: Oh, was he? I thought he was younger than that.

Wilder: Well, when he died, he was, yes. He died a long time ago. Holy smokes. Let's see, when did he die, I wonder? Well, I got his pickup, as a matter of fact. It's a '68 Ford. He must have died about 1972 or something like that. Yes, about '74. He used to come up here and have dinner with me all the time. He wanted to buy in with me on this and then he died.

Swent: Did he?

Wilder: Yes. He would have been a good partner with me, too, because he liked work. He could work like a dog even on a shovel, see. You know, that's what he did down there. And this is so crazy, people don't understand that. This is a guy that owns a publishing company, and a pretty good publishing company.

Swent: Very good.

Wilder: And what is he doing up here running a shovel? Well, that's what he wanted to do. That's what he was doing. He didn't like sitting in offices. He says it's absolutely terrible. He was good, a good hand. I can't think of much else. There's so much history out here, you could talk for a week on it.

Swent: Mallory shipped the flasks then. You didn't have to do anything about getting them out of here.

Wilder: Oh, we had them made out here.

Swent: The flasks?

Wilder: Yes. Well, they're made down in Berkeley, Norweco made them. I went down, picked them up, brought them up here. And we filled them. We'd ship them back there. We had quite a few, thirty, forty of them. And after we shipped them back there, after they got enough of them and they got them empty back there, they started shipping them out in the containers that were coming out

here, they're piggy-backing them out here and then they just took the piggy-back all the way out to us and we'd unload the flasks or slide them around and reblock them because they'd be in a different trailer and just load them off the hill again. It worked good.

But that was funny because we had these tanks and we had--the mercury is bad. There was quicksilver on brass. Oh, my God. It would eat the brass up like putting sugar in water, see. Just dissolves it, amalgamates it. Or a gold ring--you've got a gold ring and suddenly you don't have it anymore. It's in that mercury some place. It just dissolves it, see.

And I had Stuart Dowty work for me. His dad used to be the rancher at the Gamble Ranch down below, down on the lake down there, Frank Dowty. And he was a good friend, Frank and Ruby. But anyhow, Stuart stuttered. He'd go, "Da-da-da-da, ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba." He still calls me up all the time. I'm kind of his mechanical advisor. He raises tomatoes back in Wyoming in a hot house and he burns waste oil, ships them into Washington, D.C. And I've known him since he was a little kid, you know.

Anyhow, he was working up there and he stepped on one of these plastic valves and cracked it and it starts squirting mercury out and it's a full tank. And the pipe--you could reach down in there and put your finger in the hole and plug it up, see, and then change the valve. But he's down there and we're all down below and we're loading flasks and the hose is to another tank and he was doing something; he stepped on this one. He's going, "He-he-he--" He's trying to say, "Help!" He finally got it out, "Help, help!" [laughter] It was so funny. I still laugh. I think about him, poor old Stuart. All he did was stutter. "Help, help!" And we finally ran up and got another valve and put it on there. Oh, yeah. There were a lot of funny things that happened.

Swent: You were still doing that when the gold operation began.

Wilder: Oh, yes. This is what was kind of funny because Homestake kept thinking I'm telling them fairy tales on the rock plant. "I'm going to build a new rock plant right in here."

And they kind of went, "Ha, ha, ha. He's trying to get more money."

I said, "Hey, I'm not trying to get anything from you." But we were planning to do it and all you have is a lease to prospect. We're going to build a rock plant because we got the men and you know, I mean, we want to be fair, keep going.

Swent: Good business.

Wilder: They came back and the damn thing was all done. They went, "Oh, my God. You really did build a rock plant."

"Yes."

"Hmmm."

And then I said, "Well, we were trying to get done with this rock plant real quick so we can get started on the forms because we've got stuff coming in. We've got another run for Mallory, you know, starting in more than likely February or something like that. We'd like to have it before it gets really hot in the weather."

And they kind of went, "Ha, ha, ha," again.

And I remember they came up; Dr. McLaughlin--and they went, "God, this guy is an absolute lunatic." They came back up and they went, "What the heck is this?"

Just drums from the plant all the way up to the gate, almost, see. We had 3800 drums, 4,000 drums, something like that. They came up and they went, "Oh, my God, what is this? Quick, make some kind of a deal before this guy says he's going to do something else."

And that is a fact. I think you could hear that real easy from almost anybody. And I wasn't kidding them. And we did make the run. It worked out good. We ran all those drums. It did make it a little different because I didn't have to do any pressuring with Homestake. I didn't do anything. And I wasn't kidding them. I didn't have any intention to lease to them or to sell to them. Then it worked out good in the end because we kind of had some respect for each other.

Swent: Was there gold in the Gale pit?

Wilder: In the Gale pit, that's where I got the gold assay. This is one of the things that bugged me just a little bit.

Swent: What was happening to the gold all those years?

Wilder: Oh, it's gone. It's in the calcines.

Swent: In the calcines.

Wilder: Well, pretty definitely. I thought about that, one time. Don't worry about it; there's some gold in the calcines. But we shipped the calcines for decorative rock and we shipped the--the San Quentin had decorative rock all over the place. That was where they picked up the first pieces, a quarter of an ounce to the ton, right on the top of the ground, see. But we'd been making decorative rock out of it.

Swent: So, it's in people's fireplaces?

Wilder: Oh, it's in fireplaces and it's in their yard and everywhere. They've got all kinds of stuff that's a quarter of an ounce to the ton. They can't worry about it, you know. But that is funny. You know that's interesting. That darn Gale. That's where I got the two-thirds of an ounce. I can point out exactly where it was. And they could never duplicate that. I know that that's not baloney. If they can't duplicate it, that means we're not in the same conditions. Why did I find that one piece? Actually, I didn't. I had it; it was a beautiful sample of cinnabar. I mean, oh, God, it was fantastic because I showed it to Mel Stinson. Do you know Mel Stinson?

Swent: No.

Wilder: He was the state geologist and you'll see quite a bit of stuff written by him. And Mel used to have a partner, kind of a friend, that was a chief in the navy, that didn't work for the state. He used to come up with Mel all the time. They used to come up here about every six months. I stopped and saw Mel down at the Ferry Building and I said, "God, I got a beautiful piece of rock here." And he looked at. Kay was with me at the time, too.

And he said, "Oh, that's beautiful. That's gorgeous." The cinnabar was crystals like dogtooth quartz, only they looked like little rubies. Oh, it was beautiful. Then I had some pyrites. He said, "I think I'd get a gold, silver [assay] because that's enough mineralization there that there could be something in it." Well, it did come out two-thirds of an ounce.

Martin Quist called me up after Homestake made the announcement that this was a big find for the year, you know, and all that. He called me and he said, "I was so shocked to see that, Bill, I had to call you up," (because by then we had a phone, see). He said, "I went down to the lab last night and dug up that reference sample that we kept, and re-ran it. It was exactly point six-seven-five; there's no doubt about it."

So I said, "See, we knew about it before anybody." We knew about it six, seven years before anybody. But that was pretty good.

Swent: Well, good thing you hung onto it.

Wilder: No, I didn't believe it. I mean, it didn't mean anything because it wasn't worth anything, you know, as far as you're not going to drop the mercury operation for something that's worth twenty dollars a ton less or something.

Swent: No. That's right.

Wilder: Of course, if you'd known it, maybe you'd have run both operations together.

Swent: Well, you ended up with both, in a way.

Wilder: This worked out good. I've no complaints of this.

Swent: No.

Wilder: I'd better let you go.

Looking Back with No Regrets

Swent: Yes, I think it's probably time to quit. You came out on the winning end of the stick anyway.

Wilder: At the end, I sure did. I would never have been able to do anything with it. What the heck. That's why people say, "Aren't you sorry you sold it?" I go, "No." I couldn't do this. Nobody could do this. It takes somebody like the--

Swent: It takes a company, a big company.

Wilder: A big company and even then it took a lot of, boy, a lot of recriminations. There were a lot of people not for it, a lot of people--there was a lot of opposition. To the road--

Swent: There probably still is a lot. How about some of these people on Morgan Valley Road? Did they ever settle down or are they still unhappy?

Wilder: No, they're happy.

Swent: Oh, they are?

Wilder: Well, I never heard anybody around here complain.

Swent: There was somebody named Johnson who was unhappy.

Wilder: Oh, Mike Johnson was an idiot. He isn't on Morgan Valley Road, though.

Swent: Oh, I thought he was.

Wilder: No, he's back over there where we got our place over on the other piece. We bought the Landman Ranch and he's next to us there. But this guy's a real idiot. He's the guy who was dueling with one of Homestake's bus drivers. He pulled up in front of him, you know, going down the road, passed him. He got in front and then stopped, then drove away and then stopped. Kept doing that. And this guy is a pretty good guy. I knew this guy, too. And he got this bus driver so upset. You never, never heard of this but it happened.

He got this bus driver so upset, and the guy is kind of scholarly looking. He looks like a teacher or something, wears glasses. He was getting so fuming that this Mike pulled up and stopped, stopped the bus. By then, all the passengers--this is a construction crew--were going, "Man, go get him." He ran out and he grabbed Mike. Bam! Put him back in the car, jumped in the bus and drove on into town. That was the end of that. Mike never said one word about it. But he was trying to goof up the bus, is what it was. And all that crew in the bus--you'd have to be one of this bunch, see. Hey! He'd been doing that for a couple of days to him.

Swent: He was very unhappy about all of that.

Wilder: Oh, he had an axe to grind. That's the bad part. He worked for Homestake and he got fired because he didn't do things that he was--he was playing, "Well, I'm important to this company because I own land up here. They have to keep me working. I don't have to work for them. They have to pay me whether I work or not."

[The following was added to the transcript by Mr. Wilder when he reviewed it.]

The lease eventually ran out and was superceded by a land trade for a ranch in Kelseyville, with One Shot retaining 5 % of the gross mineral production or dollar equivalent. This was later reduced to 2.5% upon payment of $5,000,000.

I was pretty sure that Casburn's tactic was a new one on me and I knew a lot of used car salesmen. He would present an outrageous lease which no one in his right mind would sign, and then let me suggest an alternative to an item which I would initially slant just as badly toward One Shot's favor but when reading it I would say, that is not fair to Homestake, so I would come to some middle ground, as I began looking out for Homestake's interest. It is a strategy I had never seen before. I defended the agreement as being fair to both parties.

IX PRIOR HISTORY OF THE KNOXVILLE DISTRICT

[Interview 2: June 23, 1995]##

History of the Manhattan Mine

Swent: We're continuing now in Nice, California, on June 23, 1995, at the home of Walter Wilcox. We didn't go back into the history in our previous interview.

Wilder: Yes, that's right.

Swent: And now I wanted to catch up on some of the history. You brought this letter from your grandfather about Adams Spring, so we know your family had been up here. Did your grandfather ever talk to you about the mines up here?

Wilder: No, not really. I never did talk to my grandfather, because he was dead long before I was born, and my grandmother I never knew either.

Swent: No. So what you picked up about the history, you've picked up after you moved up here.

Wilder: The history was picked up before we leased the mine, by researching records, county, state, and federal records to find out who were the original partners or members of Lake Mining Company. Plus a lot of tales of guys who were around in the early 1900s.

Swent: But you've learned that up around here yourself.

Wilder: Yes, from federal, state, and county offices and records. Oh, and then the title to the Manhattan Mine, the title is pretty complex, see. Real complex. As can be confirmed by anyone familiar with it.

Swent: And you had to trace that all out.

Wilder: Yes, as there were attempts then to try and change the history. And I have all these papers. I gave Homestake a lot of paper on that too, because it was complex and I gave them some history of what preceded us.

Previous Owners

Swent: Did you meet any of the former owners?

Wilder: Yes. Naturally, I met the two Knox girls, Cathy Cushingham and Virginia Butler, who were not living around here.

Swent: But I meant long before that, did you--

Wilder: Oh, no, no, before that, no.

Swent: They were all gone?

Wilder: There was only two owners, and that was the Knox's two daughters.

Swent: Oh, really?

Wilder: See, the other ones had gotten out of it. That would be John Redington, that was the predecessor to Redington Drug Company, which--there were several partners before 1900, most very prominent in mining.

Swent: John Redington had the Knoxville.

Wilder: They had Knoxville, which he was a partner in Manhattan. Horatio Livermore, who had the Oat Hill, he was a partner in the Manhattan. Caleb Hobbs--I don't know about Caleb Hobbs, what his occupation was. Levi Stevens was the president of the California Mercantile Bank, and he was a partner in the Lake Mine. John Osborn was a partner, and he was one of the ones, along with Knox, that had these patents on these furnaces and things that--the Knox-Osborn condensers and K&O furnaces.

Swent: Oh, the Osborn furnaces.

Wilder: Yes, Knox-Osborn, see, is pretty famous. Levi Stevens, Caleb Hobbs, Horatio Livermore, which is the Oat Hill, and Norman Livermore; John Livermore you've met, yes. John Redington, Caleb Hobbs, Levi Stevens. I might be missing some of the names of the original company.

The XLCR Mine

Swent: You had talked about the Excelsior or XLCR.

Wilder: XLCR. That XLCR that had Knoxville, I believe, is a letter from--this is just my own supposition, but it seems funny that the partners all had an initial in there, and it sounded right. XL, Knox would take an X, and Livermore an L, Caleb Hobbs, John Redington--and XLCR was a pretty good name back in those days. But it's not spelled EX, it's spelled with an XLCR. That's the way the name of it was.

Swent: All right.

Wilder: So I kind of think that's where it came from, but that's supposition.

Morgan North Recalled

Swent: You told me a story once about meeting with Morgan North when he was running Knoxville.

Wilder: Oh, Morgan was a pretty good friend of mine, yes. He was running Knoxville for the Gambles, Launce and George. We didn't just meet; we used to go out--not out, he would come up to my house for dinner about every week or every other week. "Out" was a good hour drive each way. To go out meant at least two hours of white-knuckle driving.

Swent: This was when you were at the Manhattan and he was at the Knoxville?

Wilder: Yes, right down at Knoxville, you know? And he was there alone. Flora didn't come up at all. She'd come up once in a while, but she kind of looked down her nose at the mining. She was into publishing, the Howell North books, and basically, that was Morgan's outfit and he just abdicated. He didn't dig that too

much. He was still listed, I guess, as the editor, but he liked the mining rather than the books.

Swent: He liked the mining.

Wilder: Yes. And Morgan and I, we could find something to argue over every time. I mean, we were awful good friends. He wanted to be a partner with me too. He would have been a good one.

Swent: Did he?

Wilder: Oh, yes. That's when Morgan didn't have partners, but we were together a long time there, a couple of years doing this.

Swent: He was just leasing the Knoxville, wasn't he?

Wilder: He was running it basically on a--Morgan North Mine Management. It was a contract like with Gambles. Well, he's a cousin or something to Launce and George, see.

Swent: Oh, is he?

Wilder: Yes. This is--I'm not sure.

Swent: But he didn't own the mine, did he?

Wilder: Oh, no.

Swent: No.

Wilder: It belonged to Launce and George, and then they sold it to Homestake. But Morgan's dad, I think, was a farmer down there, it was in the Monticello Valley, but he had a ranch down there by Monticello, see.

Swent: Was he a good miner?

Wilder: One of the best. He was a crackerjack. He was good--[laughs] and he was funny. I can still picture him so gosh darn much because we got along pretty good. [laughs] And now that cigar, he'd be chewing on a cigar; he never smoked the cigar, he chewed the cigar.

Swent: Oh, dear.

Wilder: Digging with the shovel; the harder the shovel dug, the harder he bites the cigar. [laughs] And I just got to be just real good friends. He was a lot different than I was. Maybe that's why we got along so good, see. You know, because we would have something

to argue about, this is not the way to do that. [laughs] And most of the time, I could hold my own pretty good with him on these things. He was a pretty good technical person.

Swent: Was he?

Wilder: And he was just a good guy. I liked Morgan. As a matter of fact, I sure miss him. We didn't go ahead with the partnership because I said, "Oh, boy, I'm not a big fan of partners. I'm kind of a loner." And when the Matsumotos got out, I said, "Well--" see, he could have bought Matsumoto's thing, and, "Ah, maybe we'd better not," you know. So by then, he'd gotten--well, I guess he got dead, that's what happened. He cut himself, I believe, shaving, and they couldn't stop the bleeding. He was a hemophiliac, see, he was a bleeder, and he bled to death, basically.

Swent: Oh, my. Up there at the mine?

Wilder: No, he ran down. They got him down to the city and in the hospital, and I guess they couldn't do anything or something, I don't know what happened. I never really got a good story on that, because it was kind of a shame, because he was a good guy. You had to know him, you know? [laughs] As a matter of fact, David James reminds me a lot of Morgan. This is Dave James; Walt [Wilcox] knows him too. Dave's a good friend of mine.

Swent: Is he a miner?

Wilder: He was an accountant with Arthur Andersen, see, like a vice president or something in the outfit, and Dave's a good friend. But both so different--[laughs] I mean, God, he's over here and he'd buy a brand-new pickup or something. I don't want a new pickup, I want an old pickup, because if I got a new pickup, I can't drive through brush with it and everything. So all of a sudden you go, "Man, I got $30,000 in this thing and I'm scratching it all to pieces!" Different thinking.

Manhattan Mine Production is Understated in the Records

Swent: You told me another story one day about Morgan North, something about bills of lading?

Wilder: Oh, yes, yes. See, if you look at the records of the Manhattan, you see it didn't make much mercury at all. Only made this and made that, and that's what a lot of people told me. They said, "Oh, that mine only made seven or eight thousand flasks, or ten

thousand, or sixteen thousand flasks." And I looked at the workings, and I said, "Well, somebody is either completely goofy here, you don't do that kind of work." It's like saying--anything, if you've got a lot of holes in the ground that's a half a mile across, and you say nothing came out of it, well, how the devil did you get the hole, see? And that's the same thing. How did you get these big calcine piles of burned rock, big holes in the ground, and you don't keep on running like that when there's no mercury coming out.

So Morgan did find up in the attic of the old bunkhouse down there, it was actually the store, then it became the mine office, then it became the bunkhouse, well, they were going around up in the attic and went through some boxes up in the attic, and he found all these old bills of lading and stuff. It would be shipped from Knoxville, shipment from Knoxville Mine to so-and-so, say Redington Company, and it would be like 25Ks, 15Ms. And then the next week it would be maybe 50Ks and 25Ms. And he said, "I'm positive I know what this is. K is Knoxville, M is Manhattan. They shipped together." So all the production from Manhattan was all reported as sold under the Knoxville.

Swent: Aha!

Wilder: So because I said, "This is not right. I've argued with more guys who said--I don't care how you figure it, they're not going to keep running ore if there's no mercury in it."

Swent: Sure.

Wilder: Nobody in their right mind is going to do that. And there was some pretty good-sized workings up there, big pits and stuff like that, and we ran the ore after, after they took the heart out of it, we had to figure that. If they took the heart out of it, then we did pretty good with some of the stuff we'd get, that where they quit. Now, when they quit, we went in and loaded it and ran it in the furnace, and it was pretty fair ore. The dumps ran an average--all the dumps on the Manhattan, not calcine, but dumps, ran an average of something like about four and a half pounds, average. Which is not too terrible, mercury at--

Swent: Per ton.

Wilder: Yes, per ton. And so six pounds would equal--well, when we started in, it was around seven hundred a flask, so that's about nine dollars a pound. So if you had six pounds, you got fifty-four dollars a ton. That's not too bad a rock.

Swent: No, it isn't.

Wilder: And when it got down even to two-fifty or something, you're looking at three times that, so it was still twenty-dollar rock. And that's what a lot of people don't understand about the gold. The assay I had was two-thirds of an ounce. Well, gold was thirty-two dollars. Two-thirds, we're looking at twenty dollars, and Homestake came in, and they were shocked when they found a quarter of an ounce. Quarter of an ounce at eight dollars a ton, what the devil would I be running that for, when I got mercury that would run five times that?

Swent: Sure.

Wilder: See, the economics. And a lot of people don't understand that about mining. They think that things stand still; they don't. Prices change so much.

Yes, Morgan down there had--Fred Bochise was one of the first ones down there when they started to run again, and that was in '66, when he first got running the concentrating plant down there, it was Fred Bochise--

Swent: How do you spell that?

Wilder: [spells] I believe that's it. And then he was the one who kind of put the concentrating plant together, and then Chick Fields and Wes Shattuck. And Wes Shattuck--I got a picture of him at home down in New Idria; he was a shift foreman down underground on New Idria, Wes Shattuck. And Wes was another good friend.

Swent: Wes?

Wilder: Wes, yes, Wesley Shattuck is what it was. Got a picture of him in 1942 down in the lunchroom underground on New Idria, if you would ever want a copy of that or something. I got a lot of history stuff like that.

Swent: Yes.

Wilder: Chick Fields was his brother-in-law.

Swent: I'm going to have to look at your pictures someday.

Wilder: Yes, they got some of those. Chick Fields and Fred Bochise, but Wes Shattuck ran the mine most of the time; when Morgan would leave, Wes was in charge.

Swent: Was there someone named Bachich?

Wilder: Bochise, yes.

Swent: But I've seen reference to Fred Bachich. Maybe that's another one?

Wilder: Fred?

Swent: That was more over in the Calistoga area that I've seen that name, Fred Bachich.

Wilder: That's it, Fred Bochise, you're right. Bochich maybe, yes, Fred Bochise is what I thought. He was up in the Bella Oaks or La Joya.

Swent: I've seen that name--

Wilder: Morgan was a partner when he was a young guy.

Swent: Okay, I'll right, I'll check that, because--

Wilder: Yes, that spelling could be haywire on my--

Swent: I think he's the one that worked with Morgan over there at La Joya, then.

Wilder: Yes. Okay, now there was another guy in there with them, I'm trying to remember who it was now.

Swent: Was Tony Cerar there?

Wilder: Doesn't sound right. Seems like there was somebody else. Ill try to remember some of the names. On the Manhattan was Charlie Wilson. Charlie Wilson, and he had a partner, Hickox.

Charlie Wilson and Tom Taylor of the Manhattan Mine

Swent: Who was the one who had an invalid wife? Was that Charlie Wilson?

Wilder: Yes, yes, that's right.

Swent: I didn't know him, but I heard--

Wilder: Yes, the last time I saw Charlie, he was ninety-two, and he died right after that. He'd come up, I brought him up to mine there, and I would walk around and point out things to him, because he'd been there. He was there, let's see, that must have been about 1974, I guess. No, when I brought him up there it was more likely about 1970, I think maybe even '69. So he must have died about

'72, '73, but he showed me quite a bit about it, and he had a good friend was Tom Taylor, who was the rancher who lived over there at Kauffman's.

And Tom was pretty old. As a matter of fact, my daughter Kelly has Tom Taylor's saddle, the saddle that Tom Taylor gave Kelly, because she used to go down and feed the cows for him, her and Rick. He thought a lot of her, you know, and he kind of took her under his wing with the horses and that; Tom Taylor was a cowboy, because he told me about a cattle drive. He said, "I made a cattle drive from out there up to Klamath Falls."

Swent: Oo!

Wilder: Yes, took them three months, something like that, to drive cattle up there. Then they rode back, left the cattle up there, and so yes, Tom was pretty good, pretty neat guy. Old-timer. But that saddle, Kelly's still got it. I told her, "You take care of it," because it was--I believe it was a Wooden saddle, you know, John Wooden? You know Wooden Valley, J. R.--

Swent: Oh!

Wilder: Yes, I think it was his saddle. It's an old saddle, it's from back in the 1800s.

Swent: That's a wonderful gift.

Wilder: Oh, yes. He gave it to her, he said, "Well, I've got this old saddle, you take care of it," or something, and since I saw him, he died. That's kind of neat.

Swent: Yes, it is.

Wilder: So Kelly's still got that. Yes, John, J. R. W., yes. That's right, John R. Wooden. And he lived up there at one time. He was up there, had a cabin up in the Manhattan, Wooden did. Then when I guess he got older, he died of something, or got sick or something, he went down there to Wooden Valley, down that way closer to civilization, because up there, you're still up at the end of the world, just about. I'm trying to think of what the heck other ones--.

Many Good Old-Time Miners; No Crooks

Swent: Do you have any more on your list?

Wilder: No, I'm pretty well along. The names I just thought of, and--well, Clarence Reed, I guess you knew him.

Swent: The Reed Mine?

Wilder: No, Clarence Reed was president at Sonoma Quick out there.

Swent: Oh, yes.

Wilder: He was a lot of help, and doggone, they were awful good to me, them old-timers, now. I mean, really. Clarence was a pretty good guy, and he did everything in his power to help me, to look at--

Swent: Isn't that nice.

Wilder: You know, that's right. By golly, the last time I saw Clarence must have been before--it was when Homestake first started talking about that, about the thing. He said, "Well, you do business with them, but you look out, they're a big company, and you're a babe in the woods here," and I said, "I know it." That's why he kind of helped me, but he was really sick then, he didn't live much longer. I met him on a few things, and I've kind of--he had emphysema real bad, so I'd kind of help him around, because he was just a real good guy. That's why I said it was amazing, there were so many neat guys. Gordon Gould I thought was a good guy, a real nice guy, and helpful. Try and do everything to help you.

Swent: Isn't that nice?

Wilder: And Hyde Lewis from New Idria, I don't know if you ever run into him?

Swent: No, I didn't know--I know the name.

Wilder: Yes, Hyde Lewis was--god, he was a nice old man. Real good. I don't know why--I said they're old men-- [laughter]

Swent: They were probably forty-five or something.

Wilder: Well, no, they were pretty old then, now. Now, like Hyde, that was when the EPA first started and I went to a meeting, and he was kind of out of it, not sharp. I'd say now I get like that, I can't remember--jeez, I can't remember the guy's name, and I guess this is one of the things of age. You don't get sharper. But there were so many good people in that business. In the mining business, I still think, boy, if you just had that many good people in government as you have in the mining business--[laughter] I don't see many crooks in the mining business.

Swent: Good.

Wilder: I see promoters. They're not miners, they're promoters, and they're going to be selling real estate, shoes, cars--

Swent: Gold mines.

Wilder: Yes, and it doesn't make any difference. They'll sell anything. But the real people who are real miners, they work, and that's what they--yes, I'm impressed with their ethic.

X EPILOGUE: ENJOYING THE FRUITS OF LABOR

Wilder's Theories About Finding More Gold Mines

Swent: So are there any new gold mines popping up around here? Are they finding more?

Wilder: No. I still think that there are some good chances.

Swent: Are you still looking?

Wilder: Yes. As a matter of fact, I [laughing] have quite a good time; I got rocks everywhere. Took a ride out there--well, that was the summer before this, that was about a month to a month and a half ago one Sunday and had some time and took some sandwiches and just went out to Bartlett Springs and--you know, I got some theories on that; there's an intersection through there; there's a strike. But by golly I picked up some interesting--I picked up some chalcedony and stuff halfway out there and nobody, I don't think, has ever really looked at. And I know that if my theory is right, if I can pick up chalcedony about where I think it's going to be, within a half a mile, I'm not too darn far off anyhow.

Swent: No.

Wilder: So I don't know. I believe in all of the modern stuff a lot, but then I also believe one thing: if this is so good, how come--how did Knox figure that one out? You know, you look at the map of the Manhattan, the way the claims laid out, and they follow that line of the strike. And they didn't have any drills, they hadn't been invented yet, didn't even have dynamite because it hadn't been invented. Had black powder. But how did this guy lay that claim out on there so close? It goes up to the Gambles' fence line and it goes about thirty feet over the fence line, and it's like somebody took a knife and cut it off. Homestake found that out.

Swent: [laughs] Yes.

Wilder: Big time. They bought that thing, and they said, "It's got to go through." Fooled them, I mean really completely. And fooled me I know, because I went, God, how could that guy see under the ground? Sure wish I'd have met Knox, the old man, Richard Knox. It's kind of interesting. But with mining, even Homestake, you look at--a lot of people don't--they think that the Hearst name and that came from the newspaper empire. I said, "No, no, you've got it backwards. The mine predated the newspaper by a whole bunch, see?" That was George Hearst, and he was another one had a nose for ore.

Swent: He did, evidently he really did.

Wilder: Yes, and so did Knox. I'm telling you, I just--those guys are something. I wish I could understand it. Makes you think there is more to this than what we see. Kind of like water witches, I don't believe in it, and I argue with guys, I say, "I cannot be convinced on water witching with a willow stick that this is going to work. I'd rather study all of geology and figure out where it should come out." And it does come out. I did some pretty good wells that way, but still, [laughs] and I'm not--I say one thing, but I don't know if I'm secretly convinced, because those guys go along and they're walking along the ground, and the thing follows a pipeline. Well, this is not a bad deal. I can't see the pipe, and I walk over it all day long. And they go Phttt, there it is, and sure enough, it is. Then there must be something to it.

Swent: Oh, maybe.

Wilder: Yes. Something that we don't understand. I've seen them do that now.

Real Estate Investments in Clearlake

Swent: So what are you into now? You've still got your movie theater?

Wilder: Yes, still have the movie theater. That's been going up and down, and we built the new building for that publishing company, Atrium Publishers, and then that didn't materialize. I think they--I don't know, they claimed I raised the rent. I didn't raise the rent; I dropped the rent a thousand dollars and built a new big building, big-time. A 24,000-foot building and about 7,000 foot of offices, so we had about a million dollars truthfully in the darn thing. Anyhow, the deal kind of deteriorated, and they moved

to Santa Rosa, but then they went down to Santa Rosa and paid another twenty cents a foot more, and I don't know. There was something funny there. I think that they didn't have money, because before we signed this lease-- we built it without any lease. I don't want to have them have a hand in this thing while we're building with our money. We didn't finance it or anything, which is maybe--I think it's the way to go, but if I'd have been financing it and now all of a sudden the tenant flies the coop or goes bankrupt, and that's what just about happened here. See, I think they may have filed bankruptcy under 11, Chapter 11, and they've laid off all the people. This is not a sign of a growing business.

Swent: No, no.

Wilder: So I don't know what's happening there, but not good. It looks like they're going downhill.

Swent: So do you have anybody in the building?

Wilder: Not now, no.

Swent: Oo.

Wilder: Yes, that's why I say, it's--I don't know, but that's the way we do things anyhow. It's not smart, but--

Swent: Where is it?

Wilder: Up in Clearlake. I have another building, have the firehouse there. See, when they built the new firehouse, a guy bought the old firehouse, but he didn't have the dough for it, and they wanted to get money to build the new one, so they talked to me and I bought this guy's note, and then gave them $100,000 so they could build the new building. They built it, they're an all-volunteer company; a nice firehouse over there. But this guy owed me the dough for, mmm, boy, about ten years, and finally said, "Jeez, I can't make the payments on it. So I'll give it back to you." So I gave him ten thousand bucks and took it over then.

Swent: So you have a firehouse.

Wilder: Yes, well, we got in and worked on that one post-haste, see, and leased it. I had it leased out to NCO, that North Coast Opportunities, which was a county agency, basically. It's not really, it's a private thing, but it's funded by the feds and stuff. So I leased that to them, so that's out of the way. Then I had another house across from the show that I'd bought to square up--we had a half a block we owned there, a little over a half a

block, so we got in and fixed that house up. We had a tenant in it and she couldn't pay the rent after about eight years or so, so I had to get her out. She left with no eviction or nothing.

So she got out all right, and then we went in and refurbished the place, and I rented to this elderly lady, a German lady. She must be about--well, she's sixty years old or something, and she's raising three children. They're her daughter's children, but her daughter is a flibbertigibbet. [laughs] You get to see a slice of life here--poor Anna, she's a nice lady, this German lady. Works like a dog and keeps the house immaculate, and the garden, she likes gardening, and gets along good with my kids, and they all kind of help her do things. She's got these three kids, and her daughter up here, she has a daughter up here who's straight arrow. She's a real nice girl, married and has children and takes care of her children.

Then she had the older daughter who had these children, just up and walked off without the kids. I mean, just like that, and went to Los Angeles, and met some other guy, had some more babies, and on welfare and all--jeez, I mean, this is where I'm adamant on this welfare, what we do is we create a whole--it's like having a bum factory to turn out bums or hobos. Maybe I'm on a soapbox, but it's true. It does, it creates--"Well, I'm on my own, no, I don't have a husband, I just have babies. I might have a boyfriend that lives there, and he works. That's his money, and I get my welfare check, but I'm in charge. If he doesn't do what I want, he goes out. Or he works, or if he's on some kind of disability, then he works under the table, gets his disability, I get my welfare, and boy, we live pretty good." And the poor people that are working don't do that good.

I felt kind of bad for Anna, because that was tough, but she's raising the kids and the kids are marvelous. She's great; I've got a lot of respect for her.

So then we've got that house across from that, we have a walnut orchard in town, right in back of Safeway, we have thirty--I gave the land to the library in there. So Everett was in another one; he's ninety-five; he died just a couple of months ago now. He was another good friend. Jeez, all these guys are dying! They're all getting old, you know. But Everett was a good guy. He was a retired banker from Pasadena. Mr. Straight Arrow, but hey, you could depend on Everett, if he said, "I'm gonna paint that wall white," you didn't have to worry about him painting graffiti or something, he'd paint it white. His word was as good as gold. Good man. We were pretty good friends, because I got a letter from the daughter, oh, yesterday--no, it was the day

before--that's what she said, and a picture of the mother and her father. She said they thought so much of me.

And then my kids are funny. You know what I'm talking about? The Battling Bracketts, they're kind of like that. Pugnacious, you'd say. So I'd get mad at them, and so jeez. [laughs]

But their heart's in the right place, because like Everett, see, he's old. Boy, the kids, if there was anything in the house that needed fixing, they'd fix it, his car, they'd fix it. Everything so that he could get along by himself, the kids took care of him. Because he kind of looked at them like they were part of his family, almost. And Anna does that too, she's an old lady alone with three kids. That's pretty tough. So Jeff and Billy are over there, said, "Oh, the faucet was leaking, this and that, and the sink plugged up, and the light bulb went out and they couldn't reach it," and you know, this kind of thing. We put up a fence so that the little kids can't get out and run out in the street or something. Then we put big rocks around there so some--we had a lot of those goofballs driving through the front yard just about short-cutting the corner, see, it's on a corner. Boy, he's cured them of that. He put some rocks up that high and that big, so whoa, someone's going to cut that corner, they're going to demolish themselves. Well, that was pretty good, I said, "That's a good idea."

Swent: You must own half of Clearlake.

Wilder: [laughs] Well, we've got a pretty good chunk of it, yes, you're right. Not that much, but I try and do something.

Supporting the Police Department

Swent: Are you counting on it growing?

Wilder: I think so. And I think it's a place that does need some help. I'm like Walt, he understands what the heck's going on, and politics. You know, politics get to be bad, and I can see some of the politicians don't really give a darn about the people. They got their own agenda, and that's wrong. And--

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Wilder: Well, that's good. I think I did a good thing with my money. That's a good thing. And I don't want some thanks. I said, "I don't want any thanks from this, because it's--why? I've got

property there, and the police department is vital for everybody." Same way with the radio. They didn't have a lot of radios and stuff. Didn't have enough radios. So this way, somebody buys them that radio, it's gone, it's out of the way. I said, "No, no, don't send--" "We'll give you a letter--" "No, no, don't do anything, because then I'll be damned for doing something."

Swent: I'm surprised that they could even accept them.

Wilder: Well, they can. They can do that, because they don't have anything. I said, "This is a donation to the police department." And I think they can do that all right. I don't think--there's nothing--I've got no ax to grind there. See, if I had some political motive, then it would be different, but I don't, and nobody can say, "Well, he's doing this to buy the police department out." I said, "But I'd just as soon not, because there's enough people that are going to say, `He's doing something. He's selling drugs.'"

Well, if they know me at all, that's the last thing they're going to be looking to say, because that would upset me really, you know. I'm so down on that, I think that's one of the biggest problems we've got in the country, is people's lack of understanding of things like that. But rights have places, you have to help people have rights, and you have to have people's rights--well, in this state, the death penalty was voted on, and I used to be kind of a bleeding heart in a way, "Oh, supposing they make a mistake!" Hey, then I started really thinking this thing out a little more, and I said, "Yes, supposing they make a mistake, they do get an innocent guy. But wait a minute, if they don't, all of a sudden these bad guys get fifteen innocent people out in the street." Now, we have a fifteen-to-one ratio. It doesn't take a genius to figure out which is the right one, the right move. And I think the people voted for that, and they completely overrode that thing. They haven't paid any attention to it. By hook or by crook, they've gotten around a lot of the laws. I don't know, that's one guy's opinion, I guess, but I don't know, I think I try and reason it out, you know. That's why I helped the police department there, because they've got a tough row to hoe. It's not easy at all.

Anticipating the Closing of the Mine

Swent: Are you thinking ahead at all to what happens when the mine closes?

Wilder: Yes, there's some talk. Not really--that's just one of the things, at times I get upset with them. They don't seem to realize how important that is to the economy here.

Swent: It's just around the corner.

Wilder: Yes. Well, it is as far as the mine. Now, the plant running, that will be running for quite a while.

Swent: Another ten years, I think they said, or--

Wilder: Yes, something like that, maybe something less. And in the meantime, I don't think they'll move the mine processing stuff out. I can't see them doing that. And it would be foolish. I say they've got that big stockpile, that's got to be run anyhow, so the mining machinery has pretty well wrote itself off, but they still have it. And I don't think they've recovered enough on asset recovery to justify selling it, unless they planned if something turns up, they get rid of everything, they couldn't even touch something else unless they invested a tremendous big amount of money to open another mine or to even extend this one if something turns up. There's some things, they still have some more on that decline they put in, but the ground was pretty heavy, from what I gather.

Swent: Oh, really? I didn't know if they found anything or not.

Wilder: Oh, yes. It wasn't too bad. They tried to make that turn, they couldn't make the turn onto there. So that tells you the mine isnt't mined out, it's just impossible to get to some of it. Now maybe technology changes, I don't know. What was impossible in 1950 isn't the same now. What was impossible in 1965 isn't the same as now. Heap leaching was not even a process, was not a viable process at all. The autoclaves were nonexistent, so if you had sulfide ore, you either roasted it or you threw it away. Now they don't do that. So I kind of say I think that's the smartest thing. If they got rid of all the equipment, I can't see where they could really recover that much money. Unless they could say, "Well, we sell this for $5 million, and we can go for $5 million and buy another one ten years from now, or five years from now, or three years from now." But I think if they sold it for $5 million, they could go and lay out $50 million or $150 million to replace it. That means you're putting a death knell on anything in the future, things that might have some potential.

Swent: You'd have to find ore in this area, though.

Wilder: That's right. Yes, that's right, but I look at the price of gold --it's all relative now, how close you have to be, because if the

price of gold--it doesn't look like it's going down. The trend is pretty much in the $400 bracket. I think in the next few years it will go over that, and I think it will be up to maybe between $400 and $500 instead of $300 and $400. It goes up that much, that means that if you had to haul ore from a place to that plant, to that crushing facility, say, and then grind it, grinding facility, and put it back through the plant, you could either put them back to back right over in one location, or you could leave it just like it is. It's all set up, why not? Just leave it alone, and that means if the price of gold goes up 20 percent or something like that, if you have a decent grade of ore and you have to haul it from, say, the Oaks or from Lakeport to there, it doesn't mean anything.

Swent: You could do it.

Wilder: The haul would be equal to the increase in the price. So you'd still have a profitable operation. I kind of think that might happen, because this has happened, the mines--as I say, look at all the new mines that have come in. Homestake has some, and in Nevada, they have ones in Eskay Creek, some in South America and Africa, but Africa isn't getting better. It's getting tougher all the time. Labor-wise, and the mines are deeper, they're older. They're more mature mines, harder to--you can't run--and the same way with Lead. There's a point where it's not economical. So I don't know.

Swent: But you're still an optimist?

Wilder: Oh, sure. I think anybody that isn't is not really thinking it out very clearly, because you go to Lead, that's the biggest mine in the area, but there are still a whole bunch of satellite mines around there. You go to Nevada. There used to be one. It all started in the mercury mine, too, Cordero Mining Company, see? And all of a sudden, that's where the big thing started. They were mining gold then, see. And then all of a sudden, now is there one mine in Nevada? Holy smokes, there's so many mines you can't believe it. Every place there's a gold mine, there's not one gold mine, there's a bunch of them. So we've got a place that's only got one. Well, it's the only one in the world, then, that has one gold mine. I don't believe it. I mean, I think odds are on my side, not on their side, because if that was the case, every place else in the world would be a different deal. In other words, it would be an aberration, and I don't think that's true.

You're right, I'm an optimist. I believe that there is going to--. I just can't see why not, because it's too much of the same formation, the same pattern going from Mt. Diablo to the Manhattan to Island Mountain up there. You know Island Mountain's a gold

mine too, and that's up on the Eel River, see. So if you look at all these things, I think that--maybe I'm wrong. See, I'm not a geologist, so--

Swent: Is Sulphur Bank still going at all?

Wilder: No, no. Sulphur Bank--see, that's a mercury mine, and there's some gold there. But you've got a problem with Sulphur Bank, although it might be able to be worked. Some of these things, it might be that you could work Sulphur Bank if there was enough gold value. You could do some sort of a concentration and clean up the hazardous problem they have with the mercury, and it's going to--yet I don't really see all those problems, there's a problem, and that was one of Morgan North's things at that Senate hearing on the mercury. They said, "Well, we have this terrible problem." Where are the victims? You must have some, either people sick, people dying, people something. Well, all they came up with was those people in Japan. Well, that's not here, and the people in Japan were eating fish right off the sewer line where the plant was dumping mercury. That was a bad thing, and that is true, that was wrong. Not the people were wrong, but the people were not smart enough to understand what they were doing. And New Mexico, that was another one they always look at. Well, these people died. They died from eating wheat seed that had been dyed red and was treated with a mildew-proofing mercury compound, and they ate this. Hey, you think if I ate rat poison and I died, I'd say, "The rat poison is bad?" No, the guy who ate it is the lunatic, see? I mean, it's marked on the bags, I saw the bags and everything, and they do have skull and crossbones and everything on them, and they didn't bother to even--they went ahead and ate it. And they were not illiterate, they were American-speaking people, English-speaking.

Working with Mercury Like Training Lions: Be Cautious

Swent: You're a pretty good argument. You're healthy, and you worked a long time around mercury.

Wilder: That's why I think it's all baloney. Because otherwise, I would know some of them. I mean, jeez, all these years, and I don't know anybody that kicked the bucket from mercury, see? And I don't know anybody. They said, "Oh, well, it affects your brain cells." Well, maybe it does, I don't know.

Swent: Your teeth fall out.

Wilder: Well, so I've got my original teeth and I'm seventy-one, so that's not so darn bad. See, when you pull all these into perspective, you kind of go, Wait a minute. Those are generalities that aren't true.

It can happen. If we would get high in mercury, my teeth would bother me. I'd ache a little, you know, at One Shot, and I'm uh-oh, and I'd get a blood serum thing, and sure enough, I'm getting real high, because I'd be getting reckless. And that's normal, you do that. You kind of get contempt for something until it bites you a little, and then you go Hmm. Then you back off from it. I'd say, "Uh-oh," then I'd start watching myself, because I'd wash my hands, I was doing something and I'd eat a sandwich or something, Ah well. You know? It's just little things. It isn't one big time that you do it; it's over a steady period of time--your hygiene degrades, because you say, "Oh, nothing's happening to me." Well, then my teeth started to hurt a little bit, I'd know right away I was getting high. It didn't hurt my teeth any, it just gave me a warning.

And we did that with the men on the plant too. They had urinalysis every week, and blood serum, I think we'd do those, if they started getting pretty high on urinalysis, as soon as they got out of a range, I don't remember the ranges now, but Mallory took care of all those things for us. When we were doing the Mallory stuff, we used to have to send in all these samples every week on every employee, and they would run them in the lab to see whether they were doing. If somebody started getting high, we moved him out into doing something outside, out in the pit, working in the pit or something like that, get away from the furnace and the mercury vapors, give him a couple of weeks out there, and check his urinalysis, and it would go right down.

Swent: Had you been concerned about this before you got into the Mallory business, when you were mining?

Wilder: Oh, when I was mining, sure. I mean, if you're working mercury, it's not any different than if you were a lion trainer and you said, "Ah, don't worry about them lions," and you go walking into the cage and this thing takes your head off, you'd say, "You didn't use your head. The lion took it off." I mean, you have to have--that's true of running equipment. You have to be cautious. You can roll a tractor over and kill yourself, drive your truck into a tree, or you could drive your car into another--I mean, this is part of the thing where I don't agree with all the safety things that they do now, because in a way, we're going to end up with a whole generation of idiots. "I didn't know that it would hurt me." Well, if I jumped off the building and I hit the ground, you know? You have to have some natural things, and I

think that's one of the things, that caution is created by saying, "Holy smokes, this can hurt me."

Swent: So you knew that mercury was--

Wilder: Oh, yes. You knew that, and if you don't, you shouldn't be fooling with it. And if you got any moxie at all, you're going to be dealing with people that are in it, and they're going to tell you, "Hey, don't do that, don't do this, don't do that." There are things that are bad. That isn't just mercury, it's in beryllium and strontium and cadmium and everything, and gold. Look at the cyanide process, holy smokes. You know that you've got limits on all these things, and it's good for a person to know these things, because I think--myself, I think it's good, because they don't go out and drive in front of a truck and say, "Well, I thought that truck could stop." The guy just run over you. And that happens; up here, you see it a lot. Boy, these guys going through in big trucks, and they're not bad people. People like to complain about them. They're roaring through here. They're roaring through at forty miles an hour. Well, somebody will say, "Oh, well, I'm not going to get behind him," and he drives right out in front of him, and then he gets hit, and he says, "That truck just ran over me." Well, you know, hey, if it had been a train, what would you have done? That's where you say, "This is my body, I'm going to take care of it."

I'm talking like a machine here.

Mines Die Hard

Swent: [laughs] That's all right. Any other things that you wanted to say? I don't have any other questions.

Wilder: Yes, I'm trying to think. The mine out there--Harry Conger said that mines have a way of dying hard. They don't die easy. Darn it, if you look over here, and if you go back, Homestake's the best example in the world, and the name is apt out here when they said McLaughlin, because when Dr. McLaughlin went to Lead, earlier, it was a dead mine, was just about the same shape as this. So they say, "Hmm, that's interesting." This is, what, ninety years later, and Homestake's still running big time. And ninety years ago, they were ready to pull the pin on Homestake. Had another year to go and it was all done. So that's interesting. It did die real hard; it hasn't died.

Swent: It hasn't died yet.

Wilder: Yes, and this one here, maybe. Maybe right around it, a satellite mine. Maybe there's more to this that we don't know, because that surprised me, that decline came into some pretty fair ore. So that shows that there's more to it. I don't think we know, I don't think anybody can see any further under the ground than the next guy. Now, you can get all kinds of theories, and all you've got to do is look at the theories, how they change. In ten years, they say, well, that changes all the time. A guy will say, "Well, obviously, that can't happen." One is you go from here to Whiskeytown Dam and up in that country. Oh, that's different, that's Siskiyou, that's entirely different geologic problems. All of a sudden, wow, now it isn't quite that big a difference, see? Now there is some connection between them, so wait a minute. That wasn't that long ago when Tom Kalk said, "No, no, Bill, that can't be, that's entirely different." Well, it isn't entirely different. All of a sudden now they're saying, "Well, there is some connection between them."

So if that's the case, then everything you know is relative at that point in time, that's what they know. A little bit later, they say, "Hey, wait a minute, that isn't right." Like Columbus, and the world was flat. See? That was right. If you said, "You can't fall off. If you go around, you're going to come up on the other side," people would laugh. They'd say, "You go to the edge and you're gonna fall off."

Swent: So you're not a flat-earther.

Wilder: No, I'm no flat-earther. [laughter] This mine, I'll find out one day, I'll get a chance to really quiz them on that and see what they do think, as far as depth on it, what it looks like. I think that reverts to the University of California, though. Yes, I believe so. They're going to turn that into something. I don't see anything wrong with that at all.

Swent: This winter, they had 100 feet of water in it, I understand.

Wilder: Well, I guess they got that pumped out pretty good. Now, they're getting back down in it.

Swent: It was quite a problem for a while.

Wilder: Yes, that was big-time water. 100 foot of water in a pit, you're looking at some--and all the reservoirs full, too. That's kind of interesting, because a lot of people said there's no water up there. Well, now there's water up there.

Swent: Yes, they found a lot of water.

Wilder: I don't know what else that's important on that.

Swent: I think maybe we've pretty well covered it, Bill.

Wilder: Yes. On history, I've got some stuff, and I guess you've got access to more darn stuff than anybody. But there's some mining reports and stuff I guess I know about. If you need any of that, why, I can copy it for you.

Swent: Well, I was more interested in what was in your head.

Wilder: Hey, incidentally, that's interesting: I may have said that in there that in 1888, Becker said there was gold out there.

Swent: Yes.

Wilder: He said you can pan it in the topsoil. Well, I never had any luck panning it, but I remembered it real well.

Swent: Yes, a lot of people read that and weren't smart enough to pick up on it.

Wilder: I was. I was thinking that. That's why I got that gold assay. Mel Stinson told me. "Bill, that looks good enough, you should get a gold-silver assay," so I did, and it was good. But what the devil good would it be to me? Two-thirds of an ounce. I'm not a gold miner; I was a mercury miner.

Swent: Yes.

Wilder: Had a mercury plant, but I didn't have a gold plant.

Swent: Well, you ended up with one.

Wilder: Yes, a big one. I remember this--have you met Mike Fopp?

Swent: No. I've heard the name.

Wilder: Mike said, "Bill, if they offer you a million dollars for this thing lock, stock, and barrel, all the equipment and everything, just pack your bags and get out."

I said, "Well, Mike, can't do that. This is my whole life in here. I can't do that."

"You're crazy." Bill Casburn said, "You're crazy, Bill. Walking away from all that money." Well, I wasn't so crazy, I don't think.

Swent: No, you weren't crazy.

Wilder: No. And I don't think that the company has done bad. I'd feel bad if I sold them a pig in a poke, and I don't think I did.

Swent: No, you didn't.

Wilder: No. I don't think so. Because the thing has never disappointed them, I don't believe, in grades of ore. They haven't said, "Oh, jeez, we've got an assay that shows three-tenths of an ounce and it turned out to be three-hundredths of an ounce." That's happened in a whole bunch of other mines, where all the assay values were goofy. Here it happens, that I've heard. I've never heard them say, "Holy smokes, all this ounces of gold disappeared, they were bum assays or something." There's still some things here, but there's some unknowns there, and I just say before they ever pull the pin on that, I think somebody should do a lot of serious looking.

Swent: I imagine they will.

Wilder: Oh, yes. Pat Purtell is another one that makes you kind of--like I said sometime, I don't know if I said that, it's kind of like having your kid in the Olympics, and he wins a gold medal. You know what I mean? You have a prize. This thing here is, I think, a pretty good mine, pretty good and big, and then I just look at where we started out here, you got Jack Thompson, he's president of the company. Where'd he come from? Here. You know? And Ron Parker, he was up there. I mean, this hasn't created a bunch of dum-dums.

Swent: No, it hasn't.

Wilder: It's come out with some pretty darn good ones.

Swent: That's right.

Wilder: And that's kind of neat. And it's been great for me, because for a guy with my education and background, and I can say, "Hello, Jack, how are you?" and you can't do that normally. You know? And he'd say, "Hi, Bill, how are you doing?" and everything, because I knew Jack pretty well. And Ron Parker. we're good friends. So it's different, it's a different thing.

Yes, it makes you feel kind of like--you know, I guess maybe that's a fear I've always had, [laughs] you know, [if it's like]

taking your finger out of a glass of water when you--if you kick the bucket. "He's gone; oh, I never noticed." You'd never have done anything. I don't know, that's philosophical, but to me, that's important to people. Almost all people want to have something, that you did something while you were alive. If you're just living here like a redwood tree, you know? Unless you can live to be 2,000 years old and be the biggest redwood tree in the world, then you're famous, but if you're any other redwood tree, they cut you up and make two-by-fours out of you, you know?

Swent: You have a wonderful reputation, Bill. I don't know if you know it or not.

Wilder: No, I didn't know that.

Swent: People speak about how much they admire you.

Wilder: [laughs] I think I get more people upset sometimes.

Swent: No, you have a wonderful reputation, you really do. People admire you; I've never heard anybody begrudge you your good luck. Everybody says, "Boy, he really deserved it, he worked hard, and he was a smart fellow and he did everything right," and people admire the way you're handling being wealthy.

Wilder: Yes, that's the--

Swent: You haven't outgrown your britches, as they say.

Wilder: Who was the attorney for Homestake--

Swent: Denny Goldstein?

Wilder: No, the head of the legal department.

Swent: Bill Langston?

Wilder: Langston. [laughs] Bill Langston's funny. I saw him at a stockholder's meeting, and it was several years back. He said, "What did you do with all that money? I bet you just piddled it all a way." And I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And I said, "That's Langston," because that's exactly how he comes across. His kid came up there one summer, and he was an apprentice type, trying to learn something. I kind of took him under my wing. He was a nice kid; the kid was good. His dad was a jerk, as far as I was concerned. And he was. He treated the kid like a jerk, and the kid was trying to do something.

Swent: Was this Chris?

Wilder: I don't know what his name was now, but he went up there, and he was a pretty good kid, really was. And he fit in like a square peg in a round hole up there, because you know the crew, the field crew and everything, going, "Oh, boy," and so I did, I kind of tried to help him. He was a nice kid. [laughs] But his dad didn't treat him nice, I didn't think. But that's the way he was.

Swent: He's a New Yorker, a city type.

Wilder: Well, maybe that's it, see. Different attitude than here. I guess my kids dislike me at times too, because I've got to tell them how to do it. And I can get fuming--boy, when they--I don't think I'll ever lose that. I hope not.

Swent: Well, I hope not.

Wilder: When somebody steps on my toes, boy, I can just still get all fired up, and it's a big--a hot-air balloon, I can't do nothing, I might as well just [ssst] poke my finger at them or something and holler at them. Well, that's good. It keeps even the kids, they kind of go, Hmm. They'll do something like that and get out of control. I think they're out of control, and they're not being respectful or something. Oh, and I can jump on them like a ton of bricks, and it's good, because then they say, "Hey, Dad." All of a sudden, they kind of go, Wait a minute, yes.

Swent: Your kids are still working with you, aren't they?

Wilder: Oh, yes.

Swent: That's all right.

Wilder: Yes. They kind of go, "Hey, Dad," because I'll go, I just get furious. Then they kind of go, "Hey, wait a minute. Man, he's right, I've been really being a jerk." Smart answers and stuff like that, and I say, "Wait, I don't do this. You don't talk to me like that." And that's kind of good. Kids, they're pretty tight, actually, pretty tight family, you know? That's good. Because they've been through thick and thin, and that's good. They stick together like glue. They can fight amongst themselves, but somebody attacks one, boy, they're right together. And that's good. It should be that way.

Swent: Well, you've done a good job.

Wilder: I hope so. [laughs] At times I go, Oh, my god, I think I'll move to New York. [laughs]

Swent: Don't do that.

Wilder: Well, I'd better let you go.

Swent: I'll turn this off now. Well, thank you, Bill.

Transcribers: Melanie Schow and Shannon Page
Final Typist: Merrilee Proffitt

TAPE GUIDE--James W. Wilder

APPENDIX--Letter written by James Wilder from Adams Springs, Lake County, California

August 18, 1907

My Dear Wife and Family and all the Folks,

I write these few lines to you Hoping to find you all well and to let you know that I arrived alright. But the ride from Calistoga to the springs was terrible. It takes the stage between six and seven hours to reach the Springs. The first night at the springs they put me in a tent. The next morning I had a bad cold and a terrible pain in my left ankle. The pain has left now, so that I can walk around, but the cold hangs on. The mineral water is very good for the stomach liver and kidneys. I drink two quart bottle fulls every morning before breakfast. It takes from three to four days before it operates on you. It don't gripe you it makes you go to the toilet three or four times a day. I don't think I will get fat at the springs we had chicken for dinner today. I guess the chickens had been flying around Lake County since the flood. How is Hugh getting along? Tell Helen to pay all hands off every Sunday morning I have no more to say at this time.

From your loving Husband,

James Wilder
Adams Springs, Lake Co.

[The letterhead lists Dr. W. R. Prather, Proprietor, and includes an analysis of water of Adams Springs by Professors Thos. Price and John Hewston, Jr. It contains carbonates of lime, magnesia, soda, and iron; chloride of sodium, silica, organic matter, salts of potash, and nitric acid totaling 199.530 grains of solid contents per gallon. In addition there are 304 cubic inches of free Carbonate Acid gas.]

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Wilcox, Walter (Lake County supervisor)

Eleanor Herz Swent

Born in Lead, South Dakota, where her father became chief metallurgist for the Homestake Mining Company. Her mother was a high school geology teacher before marriage.

Attended schools in Lead, South Dakota, Dana Hall School, and Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Phi Beta Kappa. M.A. in English, University of Denver. Assistant to the President, Elmira College, New York. Married to Langan Waterman Swent, mining engineer.

Since marriage has lived in Tayoltita, Durango, Mexico; Lead, South Dakota; Grants, New Mexico; Piedmont, California.

Teacher of English as a Second Language to adults in the Oakland, California public schools. Author of an independent oral history project, Newcomers to the East Bay, interviews with Asian refugees and immigrants. Oral historian for the Oakland Neighborhood History Project.

Interviewer, Regional Oral History Office since 1985, specializing in mining history.