

**Western Folklife Center
America Works Project**

Interview Log

**Greg Vaught
interviewed by Charlie Seemann
at Elko, Nevada, October 7, 2011**

*Log prepared by Steve Green
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Note: Charlie Seemann is Executive Director of the Western Folklife Center; Meg Glaser is Artistic Director at the Western Folklife Center; Steve Green is Archivist at the Western Folklife Center. Interview was conducted at the Western Folklife Center.

Note: Time stamps are approximate, as generated by the logging software (Transcriba).

00:00. Slate. Interview held October 7, 2011 with Greg Vaught from Newmont Mining Corporation. Introductory remarks.

00:40. What jobs has he had?

He wound up at Newmont because he wound up in Nevada—"it seems like mining is what people do around here." Before moving west, he was living in Kentucky doing renovation, remodeling, custom cabinetry. He came to Nevada "in search of a better life." He started building homes, worked in a cabinet shop. Seemed like he needed something better with more opportunity—thought he would give mining a try. Didn't know if he would like it, but it proved to be a good move for him.

01:40. Charlie mentions work Greg did on WFC gallery cabinetry and woodwork.

He is proud of that work.

02:12. What was his first job at Newmont?

Worked in assay lab doing assaying. He learned a lot of things about fire assay, how to mix flux, cyanide leach, all kinds of things.

02:30. When doing assay, people bring him ore samples, then he analyzes them for content?

Yes. He determines how much gold is in the samples—or silver, or copper—see how the cyanide does in a leach test. The fire assay's the main thing—that's interesting. One of the main things he really enjoyed [in the assay lab] was atomic absorption—when you shoot a beam of light at a certain frequency into the solution and it gets particles excited and they shoot off photons and stuff. It reads the gold content in solution.

03:21. Is working with cyanide dangerous?

They've never had a fatality from cyanide at the mine. He takes that back—there have been people that stole cyanide because they wanted to take their own life, but... They have procedures in place and they work with minimal amounts of cyanide in the lab. He has a song about it—as long as you follow procedure and wear personal protective equipment, you should be fine.

04:02. When he left the assay lab, what did he do next?

He transferred to another lab in the same building. They do metallurgical testing which is more about recreating the process—like what happens on a leach pad, or what happens in the roaster, or the flotation circuit. There's also "bond index where you test the hardness of the ore and how much energy it will take to break it down." Backfill testing for underground—to check the screen—fraction sizes of the different material—fractions. He enjoyed that too because he was learning different aspects of mining.

05:02. It sounds technically sophisticated. In the old days assaying was done differently?

That would be a good question for his father-in-law because he's been doing it for thirty years. There are some things that have changed. They have more technology—like atomic absorption. He's amazed that thousands of years ago they were able to do some of the same things and figure out how much gold is in there. He's not much of an assay historian, but he imagines some of the things are still the same.

05:51. Was there another job between the assay lab and the one he has now?

He worked in the lab and started learning about different parts of the mine, and he thought he needed to get out there and see what was going on and get some more experience. He had opportunity to go underground with the engineering department and learn about ventilation and he thought that was a good opportunity. That's what he has been doing for the past year or so. He has been able to learn about how things are done, and also expand his knowledge about how to stay safe around different parts of the mine.

06:52. Does he like being underground?

It's all right. There are some guys that would rather be underground than on the surface—he's not one of those guys. He thinks it gets in your blood. It doesn't bother him but it is a different world down there. It's very interesting. He appreciates the guys that do it because there's a lot of people that wouldn't and we need them to do that.

07:30. How long has he been doing the job that he's doing now?

A little over a year.

07:33. How long has he been with the company [Newmont]?

Five and a half years.

07:40. So he has moved around and up pretty quickly.

Because of his safety music, he found himself getting to know people all over the company, and it's opened some doors for him.

07:59. Describe his first day of work at Newmont?

He doesn't remember the first day. At the beginning he was on rotating shifts and he had to do night shifts and that was rough. He had done it when he was younger but "doing twelve hour shifts in the middle of the night back in some room crushing and screening rocks all night...." He had a hard time staying awake. He started drinking coffee again. The young fellows he was working with said "I just don't know if that Greg is gonna make it here or not." [Laughs] He got his stuff together and worked really hard and now he has a good reputation at Newmont. He's done well there.

09:03. How did he learn to do what he does—do they have a training program?

Departments are different. At the lab, they've worked hard to improve their safety program with "trainers who are trained to train." They're trying to do that all over the company. They also try to

keep standard operating procedures up to date. He was trained by peers who were also new people, so.... Occasionally, you have a big project that comes along and you have to hire a lot of people fast, and those are some of the challenges you face—getting a lot of new people at once and "getting 'em all trained up." It is important to train people correctly—"that way things are done correctly and safely."

10:17. Describe his place of work?

He has an office on the surface. He goes down [underground] about three days a week for several hours. He goes around to different active headings where they're pulling ore out or drilling bolt [holes] or putting bolts in or drilling holes for explosives. He goes and checks those out to make sure there's air flow in there and that the air is sweeping the face and pulling contaminants out like gasses, diesel particulate matter (that's a big issue underground), silica. He takes instruments down to test levels.

11:18. So, he basically works in Safety?

He is not in the Safety department but safety is a big part of his job. That was part of the appeal of the job because he found himself having something to say about safety and he was conscientious about it. This was a chance to do something about it.

11:46. There are people there of different ages? People who have just started, people nearing retirement age, people from all over the world....

True. His boss is from India. They have people from Peru, Australia, Canada, Mexico. They had a person cross-training in the geology department last week from New Zealand—from another part of the company in New Zealand. They [Newmont] have mines all over the world. They can learn from each other. Sometimes people come to stay. There are a lot of people in the mining industry from Africa, Indonesia, China—there are people in his department from China. It's a diverse group, and he thinks there's strength in that.

13:03. There is opportunity for people to go train or work in some of those other places?

It's balanced with what the company needs. If you have a skill that is valuable somewhere else that people could benefit from... When a new mine starts up somewhere else, "that's when we need a lot of help." They have people called "subject matter experts"—they end up going a lot of places because they're experts.

13:43. What's a typical day like?

They have a morning meeting where they discuss what different people in the engineering department will be working on that day. They also talk about safety every morning. Anything people need to know or could benefit from—"there's always a safety issue that gets brought up every day." The engineers stay up on surface and do planning, mapping. Others in his group go underground, do surveying, check the rock structure. After morning meeting, he checks his email. He gets sent reports on ventilation—sometimes he'll see from the reports, well, the oxygen was low in this area or the carbon monoxide was high in this other area.... "I gotta get my diggers on and I gotta go down there ans I gotta find out what's going on."

15:26. Safety is obviously a big concern of the industry—[mining] must be one of the most dangerous occupations.

Yeah. Underground, there are some issues that people in the office don't face. You can have things like ground failures, gasses building up, a fire starts up and suddenly the gasses can become an issue very quickly. There can be gasses emanating from the rocks and ore. Also, you are dealing with heights—open holes, so there's falling issues. One of the most dangerous industries? He doesn't know, but he's sure it's up there. He hears that fishing in Alaska is a bit

worse. But they've done a lot over the years to improve the systems— "trying to engineer out ways that people can get hurt." What they still struggle with is human behavior. The company is starting to switch their focus, because they've worked really hard over the years on engineering solutions to how to keep people from getting hurt. Now they are switching to "how can we influence people's attitudes?" And, "how can we influence the culture?"

17:23. Charlie suggests it might be through music?

Good *segué*. A couple years ago, he said "we gotta do better." That's when he started writing songs about safety. Music speaks "not just to your academic brain, but to your heart." It also helps you remember stuff. He gives example of radio commercial jingle—people don't like it but they know it. So he tells people "if you like my songs, that's great, but if you remember 'em, that's the point."

18:13. When did he write his first song?

It's been almost three years. He thinks his first presentation was in March of 2009 or 2008. He had this idea. He went to his boss, a metallurgist, and said "Bill, what do you think about me writing songs about safety and doin' 'em for our group," (8 people). His boss looked at him like he was nuts—like, "you do know you're in the mining industry, right?" [Laughs] He figured so what if he embarrassed himself. If they didn't do something different then people would keep getting hurt, and maybe killed. Stuff happens. If they are going to do better they have to think outside the box.

19:33. After he gave presentation for his group, now he does all kinds of stuff?

Yeah. When he was doing it he was wondering what people were thinking about it. He hoped they got it. People walking by were looking in the window. Word just started spreading. Pretty soon he was doing it for other labs, doing it for the leach pad group, the environmental group, the geology department, human resources, the underground departments. Then he started getting calls from outside the company. He started doing it for high school students, troubled teens, other businesses in town, gigs out of town. He did one for UPS, and this weekend he will do one for K-Mart. He wrote these songs for people in the lab—that's what he was thinking about, but then he started thinking he would write other songs. He decided to start writing songs about attitudes, and that applies to everyone. Most of the songs he writes are about attitudes and human behavior.

21:04. Charlie invites Greg to do a couple of songs.

One of the first he wrote is called "MSHA Blues." It is an acronym—stands for Mine Safety and Health Administration, the government body that regulates mining industry in safety. Like OSHA. People dread it when they come around [to inspect]. Draws comparison to turning on lights to look in a cupboard and the roaches start scrambling to get into dark places. It's like that when MSHA comes around. People start scrambling because they don't want to deal with it. What the song is really about is workplace inspection. If you do a workspace inspection and make sure you're in a safe environment, you shouldn't have anything to worry about.

Performs "MSHA Blues" with guitar. [He can't find lyrics so performs song from memory.]

Here he comes in his reflective suit,
Hardhat on and steel-toed boots,
But that's not what makes me feel bad—
It's the big fat letters on his government badge.

Time to duck and cover, gonna take my break;
[I] won't come back until he goes away,

He makes me feel nervous and he makes me sweat—
I shouldn't have to work in this kind of stress.

I feel like there's a witch-hunt on,
I can't wait until the inspector is gone.
I just know he's comin' for me,
Citations fill the air like con-fetti.

I guess as long as I am dili-gent,
Using the rules and common sense,
Then that dude's got nothin' on me—
I inspected my area, it's hazard-free.

Come and get me, I got nothin' to hide,
All safety practices have been applied.
I'm up to date on my safety training—
(At least the part where I wasn't sleeping....)

I've got the MSHA, the MSHA Blues,
And that's the most, all I can muster for you.

He got a chance to do that song for the head of MSHA. He wondered what the guy was thinking about it—he liked it, said it was an appropriate message.

25:04. Charlie suggests that Greg sing the "cyanide song."

When he was new in the lab, he was surprised to learn they were working with cyanide. He got chills—cyanide, we're scared of cyanide, right? Then he started learning about cyanide and realized it's like other things—gasoline for instance—that's a dangerous substance, you just need to treat it with respect. So he wrote this song to help people remember to wear their PPE (personal protective equipment). Also wrote it to help people remember some of the technical things about cyanide.

26:05. [Cyanide] is used in the leaching process?

Yes. Without cyanide, the gold industry would be hurting because there is not another economical way to extract the gold from the ore. He's not a metallurgist so he can't provide a technical explanation, but cyanide is the key. In the mining industry they use sodium cyanide quite often. In the lab, they were also using it as a solid, it looks like table salt. Over at the mills where they get tons of it, it used to come in big blocks. Now, so he understands, they are getting it in solution in trucks. He wrote the song for the lab.

Performs "Cyanide as a Sodium Salt" with guitar.

I'm getting dizzy; feeling queasy
Having trouble, with my breathing
There is weakness, in my legs
My head, it aches
I taste metal in my mouth, can't seem to get it out
I'm gonna hit the floor, I'm not conscious anymore

Cy-an-ide
As a sodium salt

It's a crystalline solid
But it's easy to dissolve
In solution, it will dissipate
H-c-n, is what it creates
Hydrogen cyanide, is a noxious gas
It can explode, really fast
That's why we, we up the PH
To [line?] more [caustic?] [...?...]

My heart, is palpitating
I keep, salivating
My throat, is irritated
My pupils, are dilated
I have tremors in my muscles,
I am starting to convulse
My mind's getting slower,
Blood pressure getting lower

Cy-an-ide
As a sodium salt
Is a crystalline solid
But it's easy to dissolve
In solution, it will dissipate
H-c-n, is what it creates
Hydrogen cyanide, is a noxious gas
It can explode, really fast
That's why we, we up the PH
To [line?] more [caustic?] [...?...]

Spoken: "Here's the punch line:"

I don't need to fear...
Wearing proper gear...
I won't breathe it in...
I'll keep it off my skin...

Cy-an-ide
As a sodium salt.

30:31. That's great—a creative song.

He didn't want to go halfway. He's already "treading into dangerous territory here, doing songs about safety." He expected to be made fun of so he decided to do it the best he could. He throws in humor because he knows humor helps disarm people. When you start talking about people's behavior, they get defensive. If he sings songs about "we're silly" and "we're dumb," and "why do we do this dumb stuff..." people are laughing and [saying] "that's so true." If you go up to somebody and say "your behavior stinks and you need to change," they're going to throw up a wall. So he tries to throw in humor and write the best songs that he can.

31:35. Charlie invites Greg to do one more song. Looks at CD. " Bonus Desert Tracks."

There's a few more songs he wanted to get on the CD but he didn't have time to do those with the main group of friends that he recorded with in Kentucky. He still wanted to get the songs on the

CD so he put them together in Elko.

32:13. [Reading title]: "Greg Vaught, Safety Troubadour." Does [Newmont] distribute the CDs as well as hire him to perform?

One department bought some for the miners but he funded the CD project himself. The company has been supportive of what he does, but he started it on his own, doing it for the company. He put his own money into it.

32:56. Charlie describes CD graphic of Greg in armor facing off against a giant shovel.

It gets people's attention. Also, you can throw on a bunch of PPE but that isn't going to save you from everything. You need to use your brain also. And have the right attitude.

33:26. Charlie invites Greg to do one more.

People seem to be able to relate to this song. It is a big issue facing everyone because "just about everyone I meet has known someone that's been really injured or killed in a car accident." There's a lot of people across the country still getting hurt every year. He's had to change the lyrics since he wrote them because the numbers have been going down. When he sings this song, it's to everyone, including himself.

Performs "Driving Faster, Multi-Tasker" with guitar.

[not transcribed]

36:04. Charlie confesses he's eaten a sandwich while driving.

"No one is without sin on this one."

36:18. Mentions law against talking on cell phone while driving.

Or texting, which is even worse.

36:29. Does he do other kinds of music too?

Yes. He did music in his church. There have been times when he's gone to open mic in Elko. He does other original songs, not about safety, more about his life experiences. But the safety songs are about his life experience too—how did he get material for these songs? Because he's done all these things...

37:02. Charlie asks about Greg's future with Newmont.

Newmont has been very good to him. He had this "study idea," and he appreciates that they've supported him. He sees himself being at Newmont a long time. He will keep doing safety music on the weekends for whoever wants him to. He wants to help improve the culture in his company and anywhere else people will listen to him.

38:02. What advice would he give to someone who wanted to start working in the mines?

There are a lot of people in the area with good advice that have been mining a long time. The [newcomer] might do research about what aspect of mining they want to pursue. He's learned in the past few years there's a lot of different jobs. It's a very big company with a lot of opportunities—drive a truck or go underground or work in the pit, or be a geologist, or an environmentalist. They have a lot of environmental jobs.... [accountants?]. Find out how to prepare to go into the aspect of mining you would enjoy the most. Maybe take some college classes. A lot of guys just want to get down there and get their hands dirty and make the big bucks [by working] underground—that's perfectly fine too.

39:24. Great Basin College [in Elko] does have mining [related coursework] and trains people in different aspects of the industry.

Yes. They have surveying programs, technical programs to learn instrumentation. They always need mechanics—there are scholarships available for that—they will pay you to become a mechanic if that's your interest. There's always geology and some of the more science oriented stuff.

40:10. The industry has been good to Elko area, especially during the recession, the community has not suffered as much, with the price of gold being up.

Yeah. The companies realize that without the support of the community they would really struggle, so they realize they need to invest in the community, they work hard to give back as much as they can, and realize they are partners with the community.

40:52. Anything else he wants to add?

If you want to learn more about him, visit safetytroubadour.com. He would love to come talk to the [Western Folklife Center] group. He's thankful for the opportunities he's had to "get creative." He never thought he'd do music in the mining industry. He appreciates that Newmont wants to improve the culture and that they've asked him to help.

41:43. Thank you for the interview.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW