Gayle McCoy
interviewed by Charlie Seemann
at Elko, Nevada, December 2, 2011

Log prepared by Steve Green
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Note: Charlie Seemann is Executive Director of the Western Folklife Center; Steve Green is Archivist at the Western Folklife Center.

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00:04. Introductory Slate
[Interview conducted December 2, 2011.]

00:25. What jobs has Gayle had over the years, and how did he end up in mining?
He started by helping his father lay carpet. Graduated from high school, laid carpet with his father for four or five years. The housing market went down a little bit in Wyoming so he went and worked on a rig for about six months, and then started in mining.

00:51. How old was he when he started working in mining?
He was 21 years old, and he's been doing it ever since.

01:05. What sort of work does he do now in the mines?
Now he's an equipment operator. He runs loaders, dozers, blades, rubber tires, also what he calls the "toy hauler," the rig he uses to haul all the equipment down to the shop to be repaired.

01:27. Are some of these the really huge things?
Yes. He hauls all the dozers and all the drills to the shop.

01:39. He works for Barrick, but which mine is he actually at?
He works at the Bald Mountain mine.

01:47. What is a typical work day like?
He doesn't know what he's going to do each day until he arrives at work. Some days, if he has to haul equipment down, he'll do that the first three or four hours, however long it takes. He'll go get a drill and haul it down to the shop. They may have a dozer there ready to go back to the pit, so he'll load it up and haul it to the pit. The foreman will come get him, and he might go run a blade for an hour or two, or the foreman will put him on a loader for an hour or two, or on a dozer. He might drive truck. He doesn't know what he's going to do until he gets there.

02:31. How long is a typical day? Does he work shift work?
Yes, he works shift work. He starts Monday on day shift. He leaves the house at four o'clock [in the morning]. The bus will pick him up at 4:20. The bus will drop him back off at 7:20 at night. They work a 12-hour day, plus travel time out [to the mine] and back.
02:47. Do they work rotating shifts?
Yes, rotating shifts, three weeks [working] days, [then] three weeks [working] nights. They work four days on, four days off.

03:00. Does a person ever get used to that?
His body has gotten used to it. He's been mining since 1976, and it's been rotating shifts since then, so he is used to it.

03:16. Charlie only ever had one job where he did that for a very short time. Just when you get used to two weeks of doing one thing, it went to something else.
Gayle has had it worse. He's had it where you work four days on, [one] day off, four nights [on], [one] day off, four graveyards, two days off.

03:37. Does he do this for a stretch of time, then get a chunk of time off?
No. It's four days—work four days and off four days.

03:47. When Gayle started mine work he wasn't doing the same job he is now?
No.

04:01. Walk us through his first job?
He started out at Cortez. When he first came to Nevada, he went to work for Newmont. He was a truck driver. He drove truck for three months, then went up to Rain as a loader-crusher operator. He fed the crusher. A crusher is—they grind up the ore and put it through the mill for processing. He takes big rocks, and it [becomes] slurry. They crush it all down, and it goes into the mill and becomes slurry. He did that about three years until Rain shut down. Then he went up to the north area, drove truck and some equipment up there for about three months, then got transferred back down to gold quarry. He ran a compactor on the dam—that's when they started building the new dam.

04:59. Which dam?
The tailings dam. They started from scratch, and he helped build it all the way up to what it is now. After the tailings dam was done, he got a rubber tire dozer bid, then a bid back on the Mill 6 crusher once they got it started up and running—he ran that.

05:24. What is the tailings dam and what does it do?
They pump the solution that comes out of the mill, when they're done with it, out to the tailings dam and [the pond] holds the water. They bring that water back through and recycle it. "Some of the solution will go out there that they'll take off that won't have any of the gold and stuff in it."

05:51. So the slurry—after they get through getting everything out of it, they put it out there?
Yeah, they put it out there. It stays there forever. It fills up the tailings dam, then when [the pond] gets full, they get ready to build another one.

06:08. So does that bring us up to what he is doing now?
Well, no. He left Newmont and went out to Cortez. At Cortez, he worked in the gas shop. He worked on light vehicles over there. His lungs started bothering him. In the early days, they didn't have respirators and hearing protection and stuff like that.

06:27. Was he working some underground?
It was all surface [work]. In Wyoming, the mine he was working at there was in uranium. He started out in the mill, then "bid out into the pit." He was a probe hand, they walked around on the ground with Geiger counters, and marked out the ore bodies [deposits rich in ore]. Scrapers would come around and dig out the waste [surface dirt], and when [they would come] to the ore bodies, they'd get a backhoe and trucks and haul it to the mill.

07:00. Does he glow in the dark now? [laughs]
No. He has ten years working in uranium mills. He went from being a probe hand up to being a truck driver. He drove electric trucks there for four or five years, then went up and started running equipment—dozers and loaders. Then they started having layoffs, so "you go up the same way as you come down," so he was on equipment, then he got bumped [down] to trucks. They shut most of the pit down so he went back into the mill.

07:30. When were the layoffs?
1987.

07:44. How did people handle the layoffs? There have been different [economic] cycles.
They told him six months ahead of time that they were going to shut everything down. Three Mile Island had had their [nuclear] accident and it caused most of the uranium to go down. It was nice that they [the employees] knew six months ahead of time. A couple of months before they were going to get laid off, the company told them "if you have a job interview, show us the paper that you've got a job interview, you will get paid to go to your job interview, we'll give you the time off and stuff." So they knew it was going to have a big effect. Fremont County lost probably 10,000 jobs in about six months. [That's why a lot of people came to work in gold in Nevada]. They came from Fremont County. Also, the steel mill at Lander [Wyoming] shut down at the same time. So there were a lot of miners out of work and Nevada started to boom a little bit. So Newmont went up there in 1989, and did a bunch of interviews, and Gayle was one that they interviewed, and he got hired. His New Hire class at Newmont was 100 people. Within seven months, it was down to probably twelve.

09:15. A lot of people just didn't cut it?
Yeah. They were away from home. He moved to Elko, there was no place to live. He stayed out at Carlin man camp for three months, finally got a trailer through Newmont, and he moved out there with a guy from Riverton [Wyoming] that came to Nevada with him. He got fed up after about a year, and went back home. The guy finally got a job up in the coal mines [in Wyoming] and stayed up there. He [Gayle] stayed in Nevada. [Talk about people going to area near Gillette, Wyoming for interviews. Hiring practices there.]

10:16. That was his first day at work, to show up with these 100 guys?
They went through the New Hire class. It was an all day class. They would tell a little about Newmont, deal with [employee] insurance papers and other paperwork to get started with the company. He signed up for a trailer, house or apartment, stuff like that that the company offered. They started doing that because a lot of people didn't have a place to live. It boomed a lot in 1988, 1989. They hired a lot of people. People were staying in motels. They weren't saving any money. A lot of them had never seen a casino so they were gambling. He remembers a lot of guys would go down and get their paycheck and cash it at the casinos. When they left, they didn't have any money.

11:20. Probably young single guys living by themselves at the man camp or a motel.
Some of them had families. Then they suddenly realize they didn't have any money for two weeks. They just got tired of it—they weren't making any money or getting ahead, so they went
back to where they originally came from.

11:46. How did he learn to do what he does? Training programs?
He grew up on a farm, so he knew how to run equipment. His dad sold the farm when Gayle was 17 years old. He was the sixth child of ten.

12:18. Farmers like to have lots of kids so they can have a big work force.
Yep. You'd work from sun up to sundown.

12:28. When he got into mining there must have been some things he had [to learn].
They train you a little bit on the jobs that you were going into. When he started in the mill, one of his first jobs, he was just a laborer. They washed up the floor, swept the floors, and cleaned up the mill. Gradually, the mine started working him into [being] one of the operators. If they see you were going to work out, they'd start working with you more. At that time, they started [using] electric shovels. They were needing quite a few people out in the pit. With his farming experience, he was offered a job out there to start as a probe hand. He said, "Yeah, I'll go out there." He did that for a week, then went up on trucks. He was trained on trucks about two hours, and the guy said "There it is! Go to the shovel, there's the dump." And that's all it was.

13:31. What has he seen that's changed in the time since he started?
Bigger. Everything is bigger. When he started out, they had 25-ton Macks [trucks]. They had 50-ton Cats [heavy equipment made by Caterpillar]. When he started, they got 700-ton Uni-rigs. Most of the people didn't want to drive the new electric trucks because they weren't used to electric, so he moved up pretty fast to that.

14:08. What about the technology?
The shovels—they had electric shovels. They called it a 2100. It was a P&H. It was small, it was only about a 20-yard bucket. It took six passes to load the trucks. Nowadays, they are 40 and 60-yard buckets, so it makes a big difference. Everything has gotten bigger.

14:38. The comfort level inside the things has gotten nicer?
Yes. A lot nicer. The electric trucks were new when they bought them, so they had heaters in them. They [employees] wired up their own radios. They were about 60 miles from Casper, Wyoming. [Casper] had one of the largest radio stations around so they put a CB whip on the trucks, and they could pick up AM-FM. That's all they needed. Shift work, so... day shift and night shift, you had music. You got spoiled. It worked out nice!

15:17. What do they have in the cab now?
Now they have XM [radio]. Almost everything that's coming out new comes out with XM. [Mentions programs picked up on XM radio].

15:37. Charlie thinks of the difference between a pickup truck he might have owned in 1960 versus the one he's got now—the difference is just amazing.
A lot more room in the cabs, a lot nicer. The old trucks, you learned how to steer them. You didn't stop and try to turn it, you kept it moving and turned the steering wheel—it took both hands.

16:01. What about the instrumentation, is that all digitalized now?
Now it is. Before, you had an oil pressure and water temp[erature] [gauges] and that was it.

16:13. Now it probably looks like the Starship "Enterprise."
Yeah, you have a lot of different gauges, and everything else that you need.

**16:25. You see pictures of [the trucks] and can't believe how big they are.**
The bigger they are, the easier they are to run.

**16:37. Describe the workplace?**
Bald Mountain. When you pull in to the office, you have the main office, the shops, "order line out[?]" for mine ops [operations], the lab is there. Most of the pit work is about six miles away. That's the closest one. Bald Mountain is one that is considered a "small pit." Right now, they have almost thirty trucks, two electric shovels, two hydraulic shovels. They're all in one pit now. Eventually, they will spread out. They are getting another hydraulic shovel. They will go into little pits. They haul the ore either to the Bald side over by the main office, or they haul it to Mooney [Mooney Basin Mine]. From the top pit to Mooney is nine miles one way. Most of the mines, everything is close by. Where he works is really spread out. At one time, they were mining four different pits at one time. Now they are all up in the top pit, "taking it down." When he started at Bald Mountain, they worked in the original top pit. The bottom got so bad, the walls were caving in. It was single lane traffic for the trucks, it wasn't safe to be in there.

**18:13. How deep are those pits?**
The original top pit was about 1200 feet, so it was deep. They had about seven or eight "laybacks" on it. About that time, Placer Dome owned Bald Mountain and Barrick bought them out, so they spread out a little bit. Gayle and crew did "RBM," "Rat," "Saga," "Sage Flat." They're all little pits they worked in for three or four years. Top Pit has a lot of gold in the bottom, but it's deep so it takes a lot of money to get down to it. Barrick decided with the expansion, "We're going after it."

**19:06. What about the co-workers he has now? Have they been there awhile? Are there younger guys coming in? People from all over the place?**
There's five or six guys that have been out there for thirty years, working either for Placer Dome or Barrick. Most of them started with Placer Dome and when Barrick took over, they went to Barrick. There are also new people "that's never seen a truck before in their life." "We bring 'em in and train 'em." Some of them do well, some don't. Some will get in a truck and go out and work three or four days by themselves and say, "Nope, this is not for me." The shift work gets to a lot of the people.

**19:59. You have to have a good attitude and be willing to learn.**
Yes. They get miners from other companies, they're used to what they were doing before. Gayle's company might do things a little bit different. Most of those people have stayed, because where they came from they weren't making as much money, or the mines shut down. Copper has been low, so a lot of people have left copper and have come to Nevada where there's a lot of jobs.

**20:34. Barrick has mines in other countries. Do people from those places come to Nevada to work?**
A few from Nevada will go work other places. His general foreman two years ago left and went to Africa. He's a pit superintendent at one of the mines in Africa now. He works two months and comes home for a month. When Gayle started at Placer Dome, there was a general foreman from Chile that the company brought to see how he would work out in Nevada. It worked out. He was up here three years, then went back to work for Barrick down in Chile. Now he's a superintendent of the whole mine there.

**21:46. Was he involved getting the [trapped Chilean miners] out of their situation?**
No, but some people from the [Barrick] mine rescue team did go down and help.

22:00. What does he like about his job?
The money. Also, it's different each and every day. He enjoys doing what he does. He has fun at work. That's the best thing. You gotta go out with a good attitude. You're there twelve hours, go do your twelve-hour shift and go home.

Safety is a big deal. When he started, there wasn't a lot of safety in it. The mine in Wyoming was 60 miles from the closest town. They were lucky that one of the superintendents was a medical person. He began training other employees as first responders. They had an ambulance. When uranium was "going good," they brought a doctor to the site who did physical exams. Any accidents, they'd call "Doc Bell." If you had a cold and were at work, you'd go see Doc Bell. Safety started changing a lot then. Uranium—everybody would say uranium miners would "glow."

23:42. How many times has he been asked that?
Thousands of times. Safety has improved. There were a lot of problems, but once it's gotten started, the more it [safety awareness and training] grows, the better it gets. MSHA [Mine Safety and Health Administration] is out there to help. Most of their rules—where there's been a death or serious injury, they wrote laws to help out. Most mining falls under MSHA. It's good. They've learned a lot the hard way. Back in the 1980s, at the mine site Gayle was at, they had five deaths. It was some of the company's fault, some personal fault. Some of the MSHA rules followed because of some of the mine's accidents. You hate to say it, but you learn it the hard way. Nowadays, they still have deaths at the mine. It's caused by— it could be lack of experience, or somebody doing something stupid, stuff like that. We all make mistakes. We're all human. They still have 'em [accidents and deaths].

25:18. Are there people working underground at the pit where he works?
No. Bald Mountain is all open pit. The ground is not good enough to allow underground mining. Originally they were going to do that in the top pit, but the geologic formation there wouldn't allow underground mining.

25:37. Has he ever worked underground?
He's been underground two or three times and that's enough.

25:46. Some people love it.
Yeah, underground mining is a certain way of living. He doesn't think he can do it.

26:00. Charlie refers to guy from Newmont involved with safety stuff [see interview with Greg Vaught —SG] who was talking about air exchanges needed in the underground environment. It sounds complicated but it works.
It works, yeah. They've learned from deaths in underground shafts. You have to have so much air, ventilation coming through, water, and everything else.

26:35. Is there much joking around, pranks?
Not as many pranks as there used to be. They've kind of cut down on that. Employees joke and kid around, and you make the job fun. If it's not fun, you need to go find another job. If you don't like what you're doing, go someplace else.

27:04. What were some of the pranks Gayle remembers from earlier times?
Back in Wyoming, they used to have a lot of pranks. They rode a bus. They used to have squirt gun fights on the bus. "And they weren't little bitty squirt guns either!" They'd take the old fire extinguisher and those would squirt clear across the room. The horseplay they used to do, they don't do it anymore. You used to tell dirty jokes, now you can't do that. You might offend somebody. So you kind of watch yourself. You still go out and kid around a little bit.

27:48. *When somebody is new on the job, do you still send them off for a "left handed monkey wrench" and stuff like that?*  
Oh yeah, a time or two. Get a few newbies that have never been around a mine site. They are totally blown away by what a mine site looks like. They have no idea until you start training them a little bit. Gayle has trained a lot of truck drivers and equipment operators. Part of his job was to train them. He could tell within an hour if they were going to make it or not. He'd make two rounds himself with them along. The third round was theirs. He'd know after the third round if he was going to let them drive after that, or say "nope, this guy's done." And he's done that a few times. The guy's totally nervous... If he has that attitude, he would never get over being nervous inside a truck. It's like driving a pickup. They have guys that have never driven a pickup.

29:02. *You probably have to have steady nerves and be able to focus well.*  
There are a lot of blind spots in the trucks and equipment. But you learn what to look for and how to look for it.

29:12. *What about superstitions?*  
There's hardly any of that going on anymore. There's a joke they used to do in Wyoming. They had a mechanic who was always playing jokes on everybody's lunch box. You'd come and the lunchbox would be setting on a table—so he would come in and take the food out and put a live rat or snake in your lunchbox. They finally figured out who it was and they fixed him one day. He had like an ammo box that was his lunchbox. They filled it full of grease. Also bolted it to the table. And left his food in there. He was in the habit of saying someone else's lunch was better than his and would take it, or you'd find a snake or scorpion.

30:31. *What did he do when he tried to pick up his lunchbox?*  
He just popped the lid up, he got grease on him, he got mad and cussed everybody out. They said "we just got even with you."

30:54. *Does Gayle think people in his family and community are going to continue to do this kind of work [mining]?*  
He told his kids to do anything but go into mining. He's been "in the ups" and "in the downs." He told them go to college and do something else. Shift work is not really good for families. When the kids have something going on, it seems you are always on night shift.

31:46. *Did his children take his advice?*  
They did. He has a boy and a girl. Both of them went to college. The daughter lives in Hawaii and the son lives in Elko. His son tried mining for about six months and decided his father was right. Mining is not for everybody. The son had kids and found a job in town he likes and "has a lot of good fun with it." He said, "I'm done with mining."

32:17. *How long does he think he will keep doing it?*  
He'd like to say he will retire when he's 62, but it depends on how his health goes.

32:31. *What will he do when he retires?*  
He'd love to go back to Wyoming and live in his house. He still has a place there. They've been in
Nevada 20 years, but still have the place in Wyoming. They rent it out. It's bought and paid for. They can live there cheaper than living in Elko. It depends on the grandkids and great grandkids, and stuff like that.

33:00. Do most of his co-workers retire as soon as they can, or do they keep hanging in there?
There's a few that retire early and a few that hang in there.

33:11. If a person has been with Barrick for 25 to 30 years, they probably have a pretty good retirement package?
Yeah, but a lot depends on how old you are too. Some of the younger employees might not get as much social security, so they will have to rely on how they invest their money in their 401(k).

33:41. What advice would he give somebody who is just starting out in mining?
He won't tell them "don't do it." Mining is going to be around for a lot of years. "Take your job serious. Do it as safe as you can." If you have a problem go talk to somebody. A lot of kids seem to be able to stay up and party all night but they can't stay up and work. You have to keep your eyes open. There's a lot they have to learn. They have to find something they like doing. There's a lot of different jobs on a mine site. Go have fun. If you get ulcers it's not going to do you any good. "Have fun at your job. Make it a fun thing for you and your family and kids." "The more fun you have at work, the more you're going to like it."

34:56. Tell about his involvement with ballooning?
In 2006, he got his hot air balloon license. His wife and he have been "playing in the ballooning" since 1972. In Riverton, Wyoming, the man that owned the newspaper went to Albuquerque [balloon festival]. He really liked the ballooning so he talked the town into buying a balloon. They bought a hot air balloon and started a hot air balloon rally. Gayle's wife worked at the newspaper so she started helping out. Gayle was at the mine site. It got to be where the rally was on Gayle's weekend off so he started helping. They really enjoyed it and helped with the rally for six or seven years. The mine shut down, and they moved to Nevada. If they'd stayed in Wyoming, he'd have become a pilot a long time ago. [Explains development of balloon interest and involvement.]

36:34. Balloons are expensive?
They are like a car. You can buy a Cadillac or a Toyota. His first balloon was a used one. It cost $9,000. Made in 1994. It's a "105" so 105,000 basketballs would fill the envelope. He's been flying since [2006] and having a lot of fun.

37:09. Anyone else from the mine into ballooning?
He was originally the only one out there. There are now six other pilots in Elko and Spring Creek that have balloons, so it's started to grow in interest. Now there is a balloon festival. This year was the tenth anniversary. He helped out the very first year in October. Now it's in September.

37:55. The temperature needs to be just right?
No. What makes them decide to fly or not is the winds. "If it's more than five miles an hour we stay in bed." Two years ago at Christmas they flew an hour and a half, and used six gallons of propane. It was ten below [on the ground]. It's not cold up there flying. He has two 10,000 BTU burners right there [in the balloon], so it's warm toward the upper part of your body. Your feet will start to get cold. But you learn how to dress for the weather. Dress in layers. If Christmas is nice this year, they'll do it again. Last year was too breezy. Yesterday the wind gauge at work said 78 miles an hour. [Talk of high winds across the west.]
39:14. Anything else to mention?
Mining is going to continue for a lot of years. "Just go out and have fun." It will support this community [Elko] for a lot of years, as long as the price of gold stays up. "Have fun with what you're doing."

39:38. What is the life span of most of these mines?
Bald Mountain—if they don't find any more gold from today on—is 20+ years. And they're finding gold left and right. They're finding more all the time. They [Barrick] are working on obtaining permits for three more pits. Two are old pits that they worked before and reclaimed. If they get their permits, it could add another 15-20 years for those.

40:15. Mining has sheltered Elko from the recession the rest of the country has experienced.
Yep. "We've lucked out and had a lot of jobs here." As long as the price of gold stays up, they're going to go after it.

40:34. Thanks and closing. [Taking photo for America Works].
[Talk of flying balloon over the mines, but it was too breezy. Too many mountains.]

42:26. Thanks again, and closing.

END OF INTERVIEW