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‘Round our Collieries

By “Rambler”

In this article I will deal with the Katoomba Coal and Shale Company’s colliery, situated on the top of the Blue Mountains, and give my experiences there.

On leaving the train at Katoomba station, I followed the line until I came to the screens about half a mile distant. On arriving there I met the manager and in reply to my interrogation, I was told I could start at once. I then accompanied him along the tramroad about a mile and a half; this tram is laid over some very rough country.

On arrival at the engine house, I was invited over to the store and was given *carte blanche*, no money being asked for. I was simply requested to sign a printed document, authorising the stoppage of all monies which I might be indebted to the store, on the pay day out of my earnings. After obtaining what tools I required, I began to look around for the pit and to my astonishment, I discovered I had a further distance of about three quarters of a mile to go down to the bottom of a deep gully where this tunnel is situated. With a bit of trouble I was put on the right road, and what a road! I shall never forget my first trip down that hill; It was simply a track and very rough at that; in places a mistake meant a fall of from 50 to 500 feet, and yet for all that I have seen drunken men come down at night. After considerable difficulty I got safely to the bottom, and there is no denying the fact that it is indeed a grand sight to look up at the enormous rocks hanging, as it were in mid air, and in the crevices, the sassifrax tree flourishes in all its native grandeur. Then there are 4 sets of skips slowly ascending up this hillside on the road which has been cut out of the solid rock.

My next move was to obtain lodgings and again I had to appeal to the manager, who quickly obtained me board and lodging. During the course of the evening, my new landlady candidly told me if the manager had not come with me she would not have taken me in. After a sound nights sleep, I started into the pit and this is where the stranger’s troubles begin; after getting a few yards into the tunnel, all at once, the roof drops from 6ft to 3 ft in height and continues so for the best part of half a mile. After a terrible struggle I got into the workings minus a lot of sweat and all the skin off my backbone. I must say this is one of the worst featured of the pit, the bad travelling road driving many good miners away.

On interviewing the overman I was shown into a bord 8 yards wide and about four feet high. The coal is very easily got, and I soon found if I got plenty of skips, I could make a fair day’s pay. The hewing price is 3s per ton, filled with the fork. The skips are filled just flush; otherwise they could not get out of the tunnel; and 7cwt is about the average weight. The workings present anything but a safe appearance; in many places, the bords are holed through into one another.. I must say plenty of props are put up but lids are an unheard of article in Katoomba. If a prop is too short, one is told to put slack under it.. The coal is fairly good, there is only one band in it about ten inches from the bottom, and it is quite enough as the rule is that if any skip comes out with any band in it, it is stopped off the man who fills it. That is another cause for dissatisfaction, and in my opinion a very unfair rule.

The haulage is done by means of three endless wire ropes, one from the engine house over the top of the hill to the gully, thence round pulleys into the tunnel. As skips emerge from the tunnel they are taken off this rope and sent up the hill in sets of seven on another rope. On arrival at the top they are hooked on to the third rope singly and sent to the screens where every skip is weighed.

Unionism has struggled hard to get a footing on a firm basis in Katoomba but I am afraid it will never get a strong enough hold to be of any service to the miners. Every time it has been mooted something

has occurred to damp the ardour of the men. Very recently a strong effort was made to establish a branch of the Lithgow Association, in fact 60 or 70 miners paid their entrance fees, but the first time them men acted in unison to protest against an unfair action of the overman, the manager picked out three men and summarily dismissed them. Two of the three were Newcastle men and members of the committee, and from private letters received, I learn that the union has again gone to the wall.

I have often been asked: "What is wrong with Katoomba?" From a miner's point of view there is a great deal and I will just enumerate a few causes why men will not remain there.

Firstly:- The truck system. This abomination of all men is in full swing; owing to the difficult road to be travelled men are forced to put up with it. Everything, both the necessities and the luxuries of life are to be had in the company's store. The storemen comes down the gully every day, and whatever is ordered comes down next evening in empty skips; and when pay day comes around your bill is stopped out of your earnings; and should you go to the township and purchase any goods, you must carry them down as nothing is allowed to go down unless purchased at the company stores. To those unacquainted with the place, the thought will probably arise, that at all events they make sure of their money, but that is a fallacy as I will show. During the time I was there, a man came who is well known about Lambton. I was astonished to see him there and on asking him what wind blew him there was told that he was hard up, and wanted something to put him on the road. He got a kit of tools value 27s, a tin of oil 10/6, a pair of boots and trousers, worked three days, then sold his tools and oil to a new hand for 15/- and was off. That is one of the many instances I could give, that with all precautions taken, there are a few bad debts.

Secondly:- Payment by cheque. This is another great evil that wants remedying. On receiving your cheque, if you go into the store it is not possible to get cash for it unless you lay out part of it in goods. So that one has to go up to the township where the hotelkeepers will gladly cash it, but that is throwing temptation in a man's way, which could easily be avoided by paying in cash. I know cases of men who were teetotallers getting up to the pub to get their cheques cashed,.. with what result... the crowd being all there, they remained with some of their fellow workmen and after a time their good resolutions vanished and they took their first glass and did not return to work until the publican had all their hard earned money.

Thirdly:- The indifference shown by the overman and deputy to requests for rails etc; this is another great evil; I have asked the overman many a time to send me a pair of rails, to which he invariably replied he would do so at once, but nine times out of ten, after waiting two or three days, the miner has to look for them, or else go home and apply to the manager, and even then he may have to go and look for them.

Fourthly:- The distance the skips have to go before they are weighed. At one time, the weigh-bridge was at the tunnel mouth. The skips used to weigh from 9 to 11 cwt each. Nowadays, with the weighbridge at the railway, the weight runs from 6 to 8cwt; but 7 cwt is the average.

Taken as a whole, Katoomba to a man accustomed to union pits, is not a nice place to work in and there is no doubt but it is justly entitled to be called "the miners' poor house", as there is always a moving crowd of men about it. Some do not stop a week, others three or four, and with the exception of some dozen or twenty men who are married and have homes there, the men are always on the move.

In conclusion, the pit is under the immediate supervision of Mr J Edwards, who seems to me to be always on the move. First thing in the morning he finds out who is not at work, and then makes a tour of the huts to see why they are not out, and if he can he gets them to turn out. I often thought while there how long a man would remain at home about Newcastle before a manager would come and see what kept him from work. The average number of miners employed is, I believe about 50, but during the time I was there over 50 men came and went again.' **END**

