

AMERICA WORKS

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT

EPISODE 3: GREG VAUGHT, Gold Mine Worker. Elko, Nevada

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: Welcome to "America Works," excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This America Works podcast features gold mine worker Greg Vaught, one of several contemporary gold miners interviewed about their jobs in Elko, Nevada by Western Folklife Center folklorists Charlie Seemann and Meg Glaser, working in collaboration with the Nevada Gold Mining Association.

Mr. Vaught talks about his past jobs, how he got came to work at a gold mine, and how, in his present job he oversees mine safety. A multi-talented man, Vaught discovered that his safety instructions were sometimes more effective if he incorporated them into song lyrics. So, he did – which earned him the honorary title Newmont mining's "Safety Troubadour."

INTERVIEW:

Greg Vaught: I wound up at Newmont because I wound up in Nevada. I came out here like a lot of people did 150 years ago in search of a better life, right? So I thought I'd give mining a try because that's what people do around here.

Charlie Seemann: So when you went to work at Newmont, what was your first job there?

Greg Vaught: I worked in the assay lab. The fire assay's the main thing –that's pretty interesting. And one of the main things I really enjoyed there was atomic absorption. When you shoot a beam of light at a certain frequency into the solution and it gets all those little particles in the atom excited and they shoot off photon and stuff. It's very interesting – and it reads the gold content in solution. And there's also bond index, where you test the hardness of the ore and how much energy it will take to break it down.

Charlie Seemann: Tell me about your first day at work.

Greg Vaught: At the beginning, I was on rotating shifts and I had to do night shifts. And that was rough. [laughs] Doing 12-hour shifts in the middle of the night back in some room crushing and screening rocks all night.

And these young people that I worked with said, you know, “I just don’t know if that Gregg’s is going to make it here or not.

Charlie Seemann: What about your co-workers? People from all over the world, it sounds like, come here to work.

Greg Vaught: This is true. My boss is from India. We have people from Peru and Australia and Canada, Mexico. Because we have mines all over the world, and we can learn from each other. We had a person cross-training with us here in the geology department last week who was from New Zealand. So it’s a diverse group and I think there’s strength in that.

I worked in a lab and I started learning about different parts of the mine. And I thought I needed to get out there, see what’s going on, and get more experience. And I had an opportunity to go underground with the engineering department and learn about ventilation.

Charlie Seemann: Do you like being underground?

Greg Vaught: It’s alright. There’s some guys that would rather be underground than be on the surface. I’m don’t know whether I’m one of those guys, but it is a different world down there and it’s very interesting. I think it gets in your blood. I appreciate the guys that do it because there’s a lot of people that wouldn’t. And we need them to do that.

Underground there are some issues that people in the office don’t face, because you can have things like ground failures; gasses building up. You know, a fire starts up and then all of a sudden the gasses become an issue very quickly. Or there could be gasses that emanate out of the rocks, the ore, you know

So, one of the most dangerous industries? I don’t know. I’m sure it’s up there, but we’ve done a lot over the years to improve the systems. That is, trying to engineer out, you know, ways that people can get hurt. What we still struggle with is human behavior [laughs]

Charlie Seemann: Always.

Greg Vaught: Right. And so our company, and I think a lot of other companies, too, are starting to switch their focus because we’ve worked really hard over the years to engineering solutions to, you know, how do we keep people from getting hurt? Now we’re switching a little bit to, “how can we influence people’s attitudes? And how can we influence the culture?” That’s a good segue...

That’s kind of where I was at a couple of years ago, when I said, “You know what, we got to do better.’ And that’s when I started writing songs about safety.

It’s been, I think, two-and-a-half, three years since I started writing them. I had this idea. And then I went to my boss, who was a metallurgist, and I said, “Well, what do you think about me writing songs about safety and doing them for our group?” And he looked at me like I was nuts! “You do know you’re in the mining industry, right?’ But I just figured, so what if I

embarrass myself or whatever? If we don't do something different, people are going keep getting hurt. If we're going to do better, than we have to think outside the box.

One of the first ones I wrote is called the "MSHA Blues." And for people that don't know about mining, MSHA stands for Mine Safety and Health Administration. The government body that regulates the mining industry in safety. People kind of dread it when they come around.

And I throw in humor, because I know that humor helps disarm people. 'Cause when you start talking about people's behavior, they get defensive, right? And not only that, I know that it helps you remember stuff. So I tell people, "You know what, if you like my songs, that's great. But if you remember them, that's the point."

MUSIC:

Here he comes in this reflective suit/ Hard had on and steel toed boots/ That's not what makes me feel bad/ It's the big, fat letters on his government badge.

Time to cut and cover, going to take my break/ I won't come back until he goes away/ 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/ Can't wait 'til the inspector's gone / I just feel like he's coming for me / Citations fill the air like confetti!

Charlie Seemann: That's great!

Greg Vaught: I didn't want to do anything halfway. I'm already treading into dangerous territory. I'm already expecting to be made fun of. So you know, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this as best I can...

And what's funny is that I got a chance to do that song for the former head of MSHA. The whole time I'm doing this song, I thinking: "I wonder what this guy's thinking about this song right now?" [Laughs] But I got a chance to meet him afterwards and he said, "No, that's an appropriate message."

Because of my safety music, I've found myself getting to know people all over the company and that's opened some doors for me...

I'm just thankful for the opportunities I've had to get creative in the mining industry.... never thought I'd do music in the mining industry, but I see myself being at Newmont a very long time

I just want to help improve the culture, and my company, and anywhere else people will listen to me.

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You've been listening to gold mine worker Greg Vaught, interviewed by folklorist Charlie Seemann at the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada.

To hear the complete interview with Mr. Vaught, as well as interviews with more contemporary gold mine workers, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife.

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov