

For Denogean, mining was a 'Nice Job'

Most afternoons, you can find longtime Superior resident Edward "Eddie" Denogean working at the restaurant he and his wife of more than 50 years started a few years ago, *Casa Denogean*, alongside US Highway 60. "She's 71, I'm 78, so we have no business running a restaurant," he says with a laugh. "But she likes to cook, and people keep going back there. So she's doing all right. It's her restaurant; I just help out."

Starting a restaurant at his age may be considered a risky business. But Denogean is no stranger to risk, having spent 32 years of his life hard rock mining underground in Superior for the Magma Copper Company.

In those hot and dangerous years underground, Denogean worked just about every job a miner could have, from graveling tunnels to digging stopes and drilling raises. "I got hurt a couple of times," he admits. In one incident, a boulder broke off from the shaft's ceiling and broke his hand. Another time, a loose boulder fell from a raise and hit him square on the forehead as he looked up, and though he didn't pass out, he still has the remnants of a lump on that spot today.

"Anybody who works underground for a long time, you've got to expect to get hurt a little. That's why you've got to follow the safety rules," he emphasizes. "It takes a few years to figure out how to follow procedure, how to go about it the right way. It's like any other job; you've got to learn as you go. The old timers would take the new guys and work with them for a couple of months, show them what to do. They were very helpful."

Like most miners working in southeast Arizona in the heyday of copper mining, Denogean had a nickname. But unlike most miners, his was "inherited."

Denogean was given the nickname "Nice Job" after the miner who formerly held the moniker passed away. "I don't know why, somehow I got stuck with it," he says.

Also, like many of the other miners working for Magma, Denogean never finished high school and joined the Armed Services—in his case, the Navy—when he was just 17. After completing his tour of the South Seas near the tail end of the World War II, Denogean returned to Superior and went to work for Magma in 1947 at the age of 21. He made about \$7 a day.

Denogean says he wasn't afraid of hard work and enjoyed the camaraderie that he had with other miners on his team. He recalls a time when he and fellow miner Roy Santa Cruz were working the No. 5 shaft, which at the time was about 5,050 feet deep. The two men were following a drift, trailing a vein 8 or 9 feet wide at the 4,900 level. The problem was that, at that depth, water kept seeping into the drift, and it would hit a soft deposit of lime. The lime would expand and cause the mine car rails to curve and buckle, so that the track was more like a mini roller coaster than a flat track. Denogean says the drift had to continuously be mucked out to keep the track flat. "You'd start at the front, and by the time you got to the end, the front would need to be mucked again," he recalls with a shake of his head.

A lot of people unfamiliar with mining assume that at hundreds or thousands of feet below the surface, the ground is packed solid. Denogean says that's not always the case.

One time he was driving a drift at the 3,600 level when his crew found a large cavern with white crystals all around it, most likely quartz. Sometimes miners would find rocks embedded in the shaft walls that were tumbled smooth by water at some point in their history. Denogean speculates that the area had substantial groundwater thousands of years ago that left behind air pockets and other deposits when it receded.

Denogean retired in 1982, when the mine shut down. Three of his four children (two boys and two girls) moved to other parts of the state, but the Denogean's chose to stay in the town in which they had spent most of their lives, a town they had seen change so much over the years.

Born in 1926, Denogean moved with his family to Superior when he was 5 years old. He was still a young boy when the Great Depression hit, but remembers the stories of his father, who worked at the mill and made bootlegged whiskey to supplement the family income during those economically tough years. Denogean is quick to point out that his dad wasn't the only one making moonshine in the caves outside of town, in an area known as the Badlands.

Denogean recalls when families were using kerosene lamps and wood stoves, when men with donkey carts would come through town selling chopped mesquite for firewood, before it was eventually replaced with coal that was sold through the town mercantiles.

While he doesn't bemoan the advances that brought electricity and plumbing to the town, there are some things that he does miss. Denogean remembers when miners would return home from work each day, and they and their families would visit with the neighbors while the children played in the yards together.

There are other things he'd like to see return to the town, most notably a hospital. He hopes that, if the mines reopen in the coming years, the population boom will justify the need of a hospital, so that Superior residents don't have to drive into Mesa. He'd also like to see more recreational opportunities for the younger generation.

"I like living in this town, I've enjoyed it here," he says. "There are things that could be better, but it's still a good place to live."