

Lira recalls how mining sustained Arizona's communities and families

David Lira doesn't hesitate when he talks about the good that copper mining did for his family and for the community of Superior. In fact, he spent several years keeping the lines of communication open between mine company owners and the residents of Superior, to help build a stronger relationship between the two.

Lira was born in his parents' home in 1938. Unlike many young men born in Superior, Lira didn't come from a mining family. His father was a butcher by trade and also did odd jobs around town to earn extra income, such as carpentry work and sign painting. His grandfather, who moved to Superior in 1910, was the owner of a small grocery store in town. His store opened at the end of Hill Street in 1920 and closed upon his death in 1956.

"During the war there were little grocery stores all over the place," Lira recalls. "Bubble gum would come in once a month, and each store would probably only get 100 pieces. So if you wanted bubble gum, you stood in line, and you were lucky if you got one piece for a penny."

Even during the Depression, the community survived in part because of the continued success of the vital copper mining industry. So it is little wonder that young men raised in these southeastern Arizona mining communities sought work at the places that seemed almost magically invincible in their childhood years.

Lira worked for the smelter in the summer of 1956 after having graduated from high school. That summer, the mine had a partial shutdown in order to do major cleanup work in areas such as the smoke stack and furnace. The first job Lira ever had was cleaning out the mine's flue tunnel. "It was hot and miserable and very dusty," he recalls.

That fall, Lira went to Tucson to attend the University of Arizona but came home the next summer to earn more money by working at the Magma Copper Mine. He had every intention of going back to school; however, he married a young woman from Superior who was a student at Arizona State University. "I figured I had to work one more year until she could graduate, and she did. But by then the pay [at the mine] was pretty good, and everything was going well ... and it was 47 years before I retired," he explains with a laugh.

Though Lira always speaks positively about mining and his own experiences, he acknowledges there were some tough times, not just for himself but for all the miners and the community of Superior as well.

When the first mine strike occurred in August 1959, Lira had a wife and a small daughter to support, but he was still just a laborer and faced the prospect of no income for weeks, even months. "Later on I found work around the area; my wife was in her last year of school, so she couldn't really work."

Lira's wife drove the couple's 1956 Ford back and forth from Superior to ASU, and the truck would take exactly \$1 of gas for the roundtrip. "There were times when we were out looking for empty bottles we could sell, offering to do odd jobs like yard cleanup, whatever work was available," Lira recalls. "It was

hard for a while, but things turned out all right when I went back to work at the mine four months later.”

Like many miners who want to advance in certain areas of mine operations, Lira eventually attended “mill school” to learn to become a welder-mechanic. Prior to that, he had done various jobs for the mining company, from being a member of the labor crew at the smelter to working as an operator at the mill.

After being trained as a welder-mechanic, Lira worked in that capacity for many years, becoming a supervisor in that area in the mid-1970s. He supervised maintenance crews and later operational crews.

All the while, Lira continued his “side job,” one he had held since high school. Lira played saxophone in a dance band, and brought in extra dollars playing for dances in town and in other nearby communities. At one point, “The Starlighters” even recorded a 45-speed record. Sadly, the band—composed mostly of miners—broke up just before they were set to record their first LP record.

His love of music never died, however, and Lira proudly points out that all three of his children (all girls) are musically inclined and play various musical instruments.

Even as the heyday of dance bands was dying out, so too was demand for copper.

After the 1982 mine shutdown, Lira worked just about everywhere imaginable including house maintenance for the company, working as a liaison with the railroad company, and overseeing water treatment efforts, “because the company was still responsible for environmental issues and that kind of stuff,” he points out.

He was particularly tapped for the environmental duties because, just prior to the mine closing, he had been transferred from mill operations and maintenance to the environmental department. Both prior to the shutdown and afterward, Lira was asked to take on public affairs between the company and the community.

Those communications duties continued even after the mine was purchased by Broken Hill Properties (BHP) of Australia in early 1996.

“BHP Copper Co. felt they needed someone who knew the people in the community,” Lira explains. He accepted that job, and took it to heart. Lira felt it was important that the community understood what the company was all about, but also that the company understood the thoughts and concerns of the people in the community.

“People obviously are concerned about issues of soil and water contamination,” Lira says. “Mines are very careful now, and have new technology. I think most people are unaware of the good work the mines do in cleaning up after they leave, but they really do a good job.

“I wanted to make sure that people understood where each side was coming from,” he adds.

Lira still continues to consult for BHP from time to time, as well as for the new manager, Resolution Copper. “I’ve slowed down a little bit,” Lira admits,

adding, "I like what I do and I like to stay pretty active. I figure as long as I still feel healthy, I might as well keep going, stay busy.

"I spent 47 years on this property; it put food on my table and put my kids through school, helped put my wife through school," Lira says. "I've seen a lot of good people come and go, good friends and good managers, and overall I had a good experience."