

Hot work, hot temper for Art 'Cool Aide' Riolobos

Art Riolobos has a few regrets.

He wishes he had listened to his teachers in school, who kept pushing him to apply himself, to study and try harder. He went through Roosevelt Elementary and Hardy Middle schools and like most of his peers wound up at Superior Junior/Senior High School. But he was a typical teenager, thinking he knew better than them what was best for him.

"I was kind of a smart aleck, and I didn't excel in school. But they were nice to me and they let me graduate," he says.

He did have an opportunity to go to Northern Arizona University on a football scholarship, but his family was poor and they couldn't afford to send him away.

Riolobos sees how successful his own children have become, and realizes how different his life could have been if he had worked harder in school and had gone to college.

Still, he's proud of the career he made as a miner in Superior beginning in the early 1950s. He achieved his own level of success, working his way up through the ranks and ultimately becoming a development boss ... something he never dreamed he could achieve when he was a child watching the miners walking through town on their way to work every morning, metal lunch boxes in hand. The sight of that impressive parade of tough men with a special kind of bond left its mark, so when he graduated from high school his only thought was to get a job with the mines.

After graduation, he was still too young to go underground, so he worked for a year at the smelter. The nickname given to him when he was 9 years old resurfaced in high school, and it wasn't long before the miners knew him simply as "Cool Aide."

"Any time anyone called me by my real name, I knew I was in trouble," he says with a laugh.

When he was old enough, Riolobos put in for a transfer to the Magma mine, and achieved his goal of going underground in 1951.

He started out at the bottom—literally. At 3,500 feet, Cool Aide's job was one of the hottest, shoveling out the hot, steaming muck from recently blasted stopes and drifts.

"It was hot, dirty work, but you get used to working like that," he explains. "In some places it might be over 100 degrees, but the more water you put on [the muck], the cooler it got."

The quicker the muck was removed, the faster the next blast could be set up, and that's where the bonus money came into play. It was about making progress, working your way through the useless dirt to get the ore body or vein.

Mining veterans like Riolobos joke about how the job was five hours of hard mining and three hours of "shooting the breeze." While the downtime might be an exaggeration, there was never any shortage of socializing, whether it was over a cup of coffee prior to clocking in, or over another cup of coffee after the miners reached their working stations. Smoke breaks and lunch breaks rounded out the daily routine ... and

then there was the usual gathering at one of Superior's many bars after the workday was done.

When Riobos had the opportunity to become a lower-level boss, he didn't hesitate. He explains that he wanted to better himself and improve things financially for his family. Riobos started off as a level boss, moved up to assistant shift manager, then shift manager, and eventually ended up as a development boss.

"I never thought I was going to be a supervisor, but I wanted to advance and keep on going," he says. "I went up as far as I wanted to go; I had a lot of responsibility."

He took that responsibility seriously, so much so that, ironically, the man called Cool Aide ended up with a reputation for being something of a shouter.

"I used to yell quite a bit, but I yelled because I wanted to get through to my miners," he explains. If men under his supervision were working unsafely, they would hear about it from Cool Aide. That determination to keep his men safe came from his own personal experience.

"I got hurt a couple of times because I was inexperienced and I didn't know any better," he admits. "I ended up in church a couple of times thanking the Lord because I had some close calls. There was a time when some of these old timers wouldn't teach you anything. If you were going to be a miner, you had better go in there knowing what you were supposed to do."

Not all miners were stingy with their knowledge, and he picked up a lot of helpful pointers along the way. Riobos worked 40 years with Magma and he never stopped learning about mining.

One of the bittersweet lessons he learned was how to shut down a mine operation. The Magma mine was closed in 1982 and Riobos, as upper management, was kept on to help with the disassembly and removal of the water pumps and other expensive equipment. He stayed at the mine from 1982 to 1987.

"When the mine closed down, it came all of a sudden," he points out. "People started to leave town to look for jobs, and stores started closing. But the town never really collapsed; it's still here. I would like to see the community grow again. It's a good little town to live in."

When the powers that be decided to reopen the mine in 1989, they called Riobos, now 56, to come back to the mine.

"I started working for Magma again from 1989 to 1994, when I retired." For those five years, Riobos oversaw the repairs of the old shafts.

"I wanted to stay until age 65, but I started feeling the years," he recalls. "My wife had heart trouble, and she was get worried about staying by herself. The kids already were grown and gone." He pauses, then quietly adds, "I don't think I'd ever want to go underground again. I've just had enough of it. I used to like it, but my time with mining is over."

Still, he's proud of the life he built for himself and his family, thanks to copper mining. He's proud of the children he's raised—two sons and a daughter—in the town that he loves and has lived in since he was 5 years old.

"For being lazy in high school, I ended up with a good, long career," says the man called Cool Aide.