Interview with John L. "Jack" Rooney

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Interviewer: Mike Czaplicki

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Czaplicki: Hello, I'm Mike Czaplicki. Today is Friday, November, 20, 2009. It's a lovely fall afternoon, here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois, and I'm privileged to spend it interviewing Jack Rooney, as part of the library's Family Memories Oral History Project. Jack is a highly regarded expert on the Cherry Mine Disaster of 1909, and he's agreed to sit down and share some of his deep knowledge with us today. So, thank you for coming in, Jack.

Rooney: You're welcome.

Czaplicki: Before we get started, we'll just go through a little bit of your background, basic biographical information stuff, and we'll talk a little bit more about Cherry in some detail, and we'll come back and establish your own background, in relation to Cherry, by the end. So, basically, when and where were you born?

Jack Rooney

Rooney: I was born in Spring Valley, which is where the hospital's at, but I'm born and raised in Cherry. I left there when I was eighteen, to go to college at Illinois State. After that, I pretty much came to Springfield and have been here ever since. I'm in the computer

marketing business or IT marketing business.

Czaplicki: What was your parents' background?

Rooney: My mother, her family, moved to Cherry from Italy, her father, to work in the coal mines. My father's family was an Irish farming family from north of Cherry that had been there since the 1850s.

Czaplicki: Wow, so very deep roots in that area and community.

Rooney: Yes. And actually, that's interesting because, when you hear the story of the disaster, that's part of the whole ethnic…I sort of have both sides of it, these Italian immigrants coming to Cherry in 1905 to settle right in, amongst these longstanding, agricultural folks that had already been there for fifty or sixty years. That's kind of part of the whole story.

Czaplicki: Right, and we'll certainly get to that. So, your mother's father was an immigrant, working in the mines directly, or was it even before?

Rooney: He came to this country in 1902 and worked in Spring Valley. Then, he sent for my grandmother to come, and she didn't come until 1908. So, he was here quite a while, before she came, and then they settled in Cherry, about a year prior to the disaster.

Czaplicki: Do you know where they were from, originally, in Italy?

Rooney: Yeah, they were from…we're what they call Lombards or Lombardys. So, we're from up north, near Milan. The town is called Cadreddazat. It's a little town of about 1,500 people. You can see a very good view of the Alps, a beautiful spot.

Czaplicki: Any idea of how to spell that, because my Italian is not the best. (laugh).

Rooney: It begins with a C-a-d.

Czaplicki: Okay.

Rooney: C-a-d-r…

Czaplicki: Well, that's helpful. How do you say it again, if you could pronounce it?

Rooney: Cadreddazat. C-a-d-r-e-d-d-a-z-a-t, Cadreddazat.

Czaplicki: Interesting, from the old country. And do you know if he had planned to move to America permanently, or was it a temporary move to sort of earn some money and return back to Italy?

Rooney: No, it was definitely a permanent move. He'd been in the Italian cavalry and—like a lot of the Italians—even though they came from such a beautiful spot. It's always

kind of a joke with us. I guess the economic conditions were so bad that they wanted to come to America and settle in there. So, he definitely planned to stay.

Czaplicki: You said that, in many ways, your family kind of embodies both halves of the traditional story of the Cherry Mine Disaster. So, I guess we should go right into that. For our listeners who maybe aren't familiar with it or didn't see our good exhibit on it. What was the Cherry Mine Disaster? What happened?

Rooney: Well, I could tell you, if I could, the disaster itself was a fire that started. This was in 1909. The mine had already been in production for four or five years. And 259 or so men and boys were killed. It's a very large story. It's one that has a lot of sub-plots. It's very Titanic-like.

The people that are interested are normally really interested, and people will be interested for completely different reasons. I was always interested in sort of the ethnic melting pot, sort of, angle. But there are other people that are interested in coal mining, disasters, mine mechanicals, child labor, all different types of factors like that. People will be interested for different reasons.

Czaplicki: I have some questions about that, that I certainly want to come to. So, the disaster itself, as far as I understand, it's the third worst mining disaster—any kind of mining—third worst in the United States history, and it's the first. It's the worst disaster that was caused directly by a fire, as opposed to explosion or collapse or something like that.

So, if you're interested in the ethic angle, I have one question I might ask you, in that regard. Were there a lot of tensions in the community, as far as you understand it, or is it just, kind of, everybody live and let live?

Rooney: No. I didn't think much about this, until I got older. That's when I really started to study this issue that, at that time, that area had, again, been settled for fifty or sixty years by Irish and Swedish and German farmers. So, Cherry, you have to really understand what it was, if I could. You have to understand the big picture of what Cherry was. Cherry was the furthest north, deep shaft mine in the state. So, if you look at the state, you'll never see another slag pile as you head north.

Cherry was built very late in the game; 1904 was very late. But Cherry, effectively, was these coal companies [that] had been in business for seventy-five years. This was the chance to use all their experience to do it perfectly. So, they plunked down this perfect little town, with its perfect little streets and perfect little houses, where the coal mine owned the stores and owned the school and owned the grain elevator and built the churches, named the streets after mine superintendents, named the town after mine superintendents, and this was going to be just perfect, safest mine, best mine.

And, even to give you an idea how far it is at the end of the line, in Cherry, the train only comes in from the south. It used to have to back up to Ladd, to the south.

So, it's the ultimate end of the line. It's sort of the star on the Christmas tree, in Illinois. Miners all over their state, quit their job to come to Cherry and work. It, effectively, was like quitting your job to take a job on the Titanic. So, you really need to understand, I think, the big picture of what Cherry really was.

I would be completely interested in Cherry, without the disaster, because of the unique situation it was. So, here they took this perfect little thing and plunked it right down in the middle, this little ethnic blob, in the middle of these longstanding, farming families.

Looking at it now, they must have thought Martians had landed, you know. They talk about it; there are newspaper articles written about what the farmers thought of these Martians that were there and had just suddenly been plunked down in their midst.

Czaplicki: But yet…as much as they might have thought they were Martians, in some sense…I mean, at least someone in your family, somehow they reached across. Do you know how it happened?

Rooney: Well, that's interesting. I know, in my own case, my mother and dad met on the bus going to…they called it the Blue River Ordnance Plant or Green River Ordnance Plant, near Amboy. That's where they made ammunition, during World War II. My folks met on the bus, my mother, Mary Manchetti and my dad, Paul Rooney.

But, prior to that, I don't know about much interaction…There was always quite a separation, even a separation today. What's interesting about that is…think, then, within the town, the ethnic mixes that were going on. I've always said, can you imagine, my grandfather came halfway around the world, which was like going to another planet, and that first morning, he stood at the end of his sidewalk and waved to his neighbor, who didn't understand him. He was Polish. He turned the other direction and waved to his neighbor, and he didn't understand him. He was Lithuanian.

And off they went to work at this mine that was run by English and Scotch, English-speaking managers, to go down in this black hole. Then, throw in more Greek and Polish and even Swiss and Frenchmen, all down in this darkness, all speaking a different language. So, it was this big, artificially created mix. If it wasn't for coal mining, these people would have never gotten together for another hundred years.

Czaplicki: Right, it's almost a slice of how we understand Chicago developing. There's big literature about that, but this is 100 miles away from Chicago.

Rooney: A hundred miles away, in a very intense, teeny little group.

Czaplicki: With a pre-existing, longstanding community of farmers.

Rooney: All around it. So, it was interesting enough, inside the town, not to mention you laid that on top of these other factors. So, it was the ultimate melting pot kind of scenario.

Czaplicki: Interesting. Oh, before we go on, how do you spell your mom's family last name? You said it's Marketi?

Rooney: Marchetti. M-a-r-c-h-e-t-t-i, Marchetti.

Czaplicki: Thank you. This just helps the transcribers a little later on, when they copy this down and other people want to follow up on some of the leads that you offer. So, I imagine that this intense ethnic mixing…And there's a great vignette you gave, of standing on the front steps, not being able to speak to your neighbors. This must have played a factor in the disaster.

Rooney: Yes, it did. The communications was that, coupled with the fact they didn't have any formal, safety procedures. So, when the fire started, they didn't have formal warning signals, and the informal warning signals they gave didn't work. It was, basically, English-speaking people, screaming out, "Fire!" (chuckles) and no one understanding what that meant and staying at their posts, until it was too late.

Czaplicki: So, certainly there was a social factor and a technical factor in that disaster? As far as I understand it, there were two shafts. I don't know if they were east and west or north and south, over half the mine, but two shafts, to get in and out of the mine.

Rooney: The main shaft and the air shaft.

Czaplicki: But only one of them had a working exit?

Rooney: One was the main shaft, had a cage that took the men down and the coal up and down. The air shaft just had a stairway, basically, from the second level to the surface. So, yeah, the whole story of the disaster…and really, just the whole story of the mine, whether there was a disaster or not, was one of tons of single points of failure. There were tons of single points of failure everywhere.

Death was equated into their business model. It was just that they didn't really think very hard about saving lives. I mean, they just worked into it [the business model] that they would have X number of deaths and injuries, and that wasn't really a big issue. There were people waiting, out at the front gate, to come in and take the next job.

Czaplicki: And people waiting overseas and Europe for the next boat.

Rooney: Coming after them.

Czaplicki: Did the workers accept this? What little I read in Tintori's book and walking through the exhibit, I was really struck by the notes that, when they found dead miners that had managed to hold out for a while, and some that were able to scrawl, and they said, "We don't [blame] anyone for this." So, while business was making this calculation…Hey, people are going to die. It's part of the cost of doing business. Is this how the workers looked at it too, as far as you understand?

Rooney: You know, it seems like they did. The only thing that surprised me, over the years, in looking back, is that there seems to be several instances of situations where, after the disaster, men decided not to coal mine anymore. They had gotten to this country, and they had coal mined a bit. But, somehow, that [the disaster] opened their eyes, and they just said, "I'm not going to mine coal anymore." They moved and got out of the business. So, to a degree, yes. But, in another way, no.

Czaplicki: Interesting, and, of course, the mine unions were active at this period too.

Rooney: Right. Right. There have been a lot of stories about, maybe, that the union actually had something to do with the disaster.

Czaplicki: Like a conspiracy theory?

Rooney: A conspiracy theory, but really, if you look at the story and you read Karen Tintori's book and how she studied, the testimony actually, sort of makes weird sense, in that the lack of organization just plays out. They just, generally, probably got lucky all the time. There were lots of accidents waiting to happen.

Czaplicki: Actually, this might be a good point. I was just looking up some of the accidents at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. [OSHA] You can visit their web site and get a list of all the mining disasters in the U.S., where they occurred, when they occurred, and how many died.

Prior to Cherry, where, as you said, 259 were killed…On May 1, 1900, Winter Quarters, one and four [mines] in Scofield, Utah, 200 were killed in an explosion. December 6, 1907, one of the equally famous disasters, at Monongah, No. 6 and 8, in West Virginia, worst disaster ever in U.S. history; 362 were killed. Then, oh, about two weeks later, in 1907, in Pennsylvania, Darr Mine, 239 killed in explosion. So, as you were saying, substantial, substantial loss of lives.

Rooney: When you think about what they were doing…I mean. I think today our views would be different. I mean, the idea that you are going to put 500 men below ground, in those quarters, with all these single points of failure everywhere, only one escape out of here, only one escape out of there. I mean, look at just the key factor on the Cherry Mine Disaster was that the electrical lighting had gone out the week before.

Czaplicki: And that was one of the things that was supposed to make the mine so safe.

Rooney: And they had no replacement parts on hand. Now, of course, the way we look at the world, especially in dangerous situations, we have backups for our backups, and that's just normal.

But in those days, for whatever reason, the way that brain was plugged in, they just didn't think about that, maybe, resources were in such short supply, or it seemed maybe so extravagant to those people to have backups, that they just didn't have them. There were lots of examples of things like that.

Czaplicki: So, failure of redundancy.

Rooney: Yeah, the lack of redundancy was everywhere.

Czaplicki: So, because of the lack of these electric lights, they were using torches.

Rooney: They were using torches and, it was such…The state's most up-to-date mine did not—because of the electricity, primarily—did not have backup components, you know. (laughs)

I don't know, again, what the thought pattern was there, but you see it in…You know, they also didn't have formal, working policies and procedures. The mine was run by the common sense and experience of the mine managers. So, if they were ever presented with a situation, like what happened in Cherry—there was a unique circumstance there—the mine managers had never been presented with that one.

So, what were they doing? If they hadn't done run-throughs, like we do, with disaster recovery today or emergency response, what were they doing? They were making their best guess, at that moment. You'll hear in the story of the mine disaster, the reversing of the fan was a catastrophe. When they reversed the fan—

Czaplicki: Wait, say a little bit more about that. Why did they reverse the fan? Who decided to do that?

Rooney: Mr. Norberg, who was one of the mine managers…This all came upon him very quickly, of course. The fire was in a really bad spot. It was near the second vein airshaft, which means that was the basic cutoff for three quarters of the miners in the mine. He decided that…They slowed the fan, because they felt like it was feeding oxygen to the fire. But the men below started to suffer from lack of air.

So, he quickly decided, we should reverse the fan. That would be a way to keep air flowing in the mine, but pull the air away from the fire. It actually pulled the fire up the escape shaft and burned out the escape stairs and burned down the fan house. So, you know, it was the equivalent of being on a sinking ship that had suddenly caught fire. I mean, they were already in a bad enough spot, and when they made that move, then they were really in trouble.

Czaplicki: And that was the main escape shaft, so with that knocked out—

Rooney: They were really…lack of oxygen. It was a mess.

Czaplicki: The third floor had no way of getting to the second floor anymore, so they're completely cut off, in the second.

Rooney: Yeah, I've always wondered if, within minutes…because, when they reversed that fan, they couldn't tell the effect right away. But suddenly, flames shot up from the escape shaft and burned down the fan house. So, you can imagine, they probably said, "Oh boy, did we make a bad move there."

Czaplicki: It boggles the mind. But, of course, at this time, as you're suggesting, it's more of this common sense…And the company that runs the mine, it's the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul [and Pacific] Railway, correct?

Rooney: Right.

Czaplicki: I sort of trust your expertise. What was the state of regulation at this point, in which it's working? Are there federal regulations in place? Were there state regulations in place, or is—

Rooney: There are state mine inspectors, but I actually don't know much about what their goals were. Obviously, their expectations must have been pretty low, if they weren't mandating backup parts and things like that. So, that's a good question. I'm not really sure what mine inspectors were looking for, exactly. They might have been making sure that you were officially documenting deaths and injuries. From what I've read, "Were you're effectively documenting deaths and injuries?"

Czaplicki: Right. Going back to what you suggested before, the kind of thing, where we accept that there are going to be deaths, so let's just keep count.

Rooney: Are you handing out coffins, effectively?

Czaplicki: Yeah. From what I understand, it's not until 1941 that the United States gets the first federal inspection authority over mines. And it's not until 1947, thirty-eight years after Cherry, that we get the first federal code of regulation for mine safety. But, nevertheless, because of what a horrific disaster this is in Cherry, there were some consequences, right?

Rooney: They established mine rescue stations, which were scattered throughout the state. There were several new child labor laws that went into effect and several new—I'm not sure of that myself— but mine safety regulations that were implemented at the state level. So, yeah, there were several.

Really, I think, effectively, Cherry really did save a lot of lives. You know, I think that, when you have an event that's so catastrophic and gets so much publicity, it sort of, again, did save lives in several different ways. Child labor laws that were implemented and several other laws, including the mine rescue stations that were everywhere. There's no telling how many lives that saved over the years.

Czaplicki: It's certainly significant. And this is state level things that are happening. But, in this point in time, that really is where the regulatory action is, as it were, at the state level.

Rooney: Right, at the state level.

Czaplicki: So, these are significant actions being taken.

Rooney: Right.

Czaplicki: And I believe, in 1910, at the federal level, we get the Bureau of Mines. And what I've read is that Cherry wasn't the only contributor to that decision. But, given all those other disasters that I read, there were so many so quickly, and Cherry was one of the most recent ones that finally broke the log jam, and we get the U.S. Bureau of Mines. But they couldn't inspect.

So, another consequence, then, that I'm interested in talking about with you, is sort of a historical legacy consequence. So, they have this terrible disaster; all these people die; we get some regulatory reform, as a result of that. But now, here it is, it's 2009, a hundred years later, and we're sitting here talking about it.
And, as you said at the outset, people pay attention for many different reasons. So, what is it about Cherry—at least in your case—that you can speak to, that really grabbed onto you? Like, why did you get interested? I mean, obviously, there's a family connection there, but was there something more than that.

Rooney: You know, I get that question all the time. I think it's like a lot of stories; it needs to be told in the right way. If it's told in the right way, it's very interesting. The part I was mentioning before, about, you know, it's the big picture view. The fact that I would be interested, if there was no mine disaster, that's really an interesting story in itself, this idea that we're going to just manufacture this situation and manufacture this town, this company town. And then, these other ethnic issues are, to me, just really interesting in themselves.

So, it's kind of like the Titanic story. If the Titanic wouldn't have sunk, it still would have been a very interesting story, the background, the building, the thought patterns. That's a lot of what Cherry is.

You lay on top of that, I think, the time in this country's history, what was going on, kind of the height of the immigrant movement, and what was going on there. The other thing is too, of course, the story when you drill down to the factors that related to the accident—it's kind of an interesting little story—how the fire

started, and then the story of the heroes, you know, the men that were killed on the rescue cage is very interesting, the men that sacrificed their lives, and they knowingly knew they were doing, to try to go down and save others—that is really interesting—the men that remained in the mine for eight days and wrote those little letters and just barely escaped; the whole story of the recovery of the bodies, the notes that were on the bodies, the sadness associated with that; what happened to the families, the women and children, the orphans and what they did; how the Red Cross came in and what they did.

You know, Cherry was also one of the first major incidents where workmen's compensation was utilized and how interesting that is, because, prior to that, who knows what would have happened to the widows and their children? They were at the mercy of the church or the Red Cross, at best, and then, really, the little individual family stories, of which there's just hundreds and hundreds.

When you tell this story—we just had the 100th anniversary in Cherry in the last week—and the intense interest is so high. I mean, relatives and non-relatives were there from all over the country and just really kind of caught up and interested in this whole story. I think it's because it just has a lot of little fingers that intrigue people, from one angle or another.

Czaplicki: It was the Hollywood epic kind of thing. (chuckles)

Rooney: We all say it would be a perfect movie. You could just see it, the excitement about the perfect nature of the town, and then the Titanic sinking, you could say, of the mine, and the heroes that died on the rescue cage. And then, at the end, the twenty-one men that survive and, kind of, the excitement associated with that. Yeah, we all say it would be a great movie.

Czaplicki: Given that, then, this question might strike you as kind of weird. I mean, obviously, we know about it. We're in Illinois and kind of interested, but why do you suppose that, paradoxically, beyond our certain local sense, why hasn't it attracted as much attention? I mean, for example, most 11th grade history textbooks will have an entry about the Triangle Shirtwaist [Factory] fire in New York City, which happened two years later…really a year and a half later, given how late the Cherry disaster was.

Or, even in Illinois, Woody Guthrie memorialized the 1947 Centralia Mine Disaster, with the song, "The Dying Miner." But you don't really see as much of that with Cherry, and I was wondering if you have any thoughts about that.

Rooney: I would say that, on a national basis, I'm trying to think of a similar disaster that's gotten much attention on a national basis, of a similar size. As you say, there were several other mine disasters of similar [numbers of] men killed. You know, there was really only one book, written in 1910, that went into much detail, and, of course, that's an old book. So, there are no newer books or no newer movies in the last 100 years, to kind of get that awareness out.

That's one thing. Karen Tintori's book, though, that was written, what, seven or eight years ago, that was voted "Favorite Book" by the Chicago Tribune, non-fiction book, by the Chicago Tribune in 2002, and was number ten on the Amazon non-fiction, best seller list that year, too. So, the book did get some good exposure.

Czaplicki: So, people out there right now are clearly reading about this—

Rooney: I'd say the awareness is up. The other thing is that—and I'm really confident in this—and that is that there have been thousands of little newspaper articles written in the last 100 years that all tell the same little, almost…I don't want to say boring, but they just list the few little facts, the men killed, the fact it was the fire, and that's it. It's like a lot of things in life, I think. It's not what you say; it's how you say it.

You know, I'm a marketing person myself, and Karen did a good job, a really good job, I mean, it might even be a perfect job. But, again, I think the key is just really how you say it. You know, when I talk about understanding Cherry and the big picture, like I did earlier, I think that that's just really, really important. I mean, setting that stage. That's just never really been told in that way. Those little newspaper articles never do that.

You know, this is the 89th anniversary; 259 men died; the mine was 500 feet down; the cage was six foot by sixteen feet, blah, blah, blah. So, it wouldn't seem that interesting. You'd have to really tell it. And it's easy to tell, if you really know it like this. I could talk for hours on how really interesting it was.

Czaplicki: I feel bad, because whoever's listening to this tape…Just two minutes ago, you were ticking off all the reasons why this is interesting, and we could expand each one of those points. I would love to have you tell that, but we don't have eight hours today.

But, yeah, it's an iceberg, to go back to your Titanic analogy. You know, this is just the tip we're kind of talking about today. I wanted to clarify one term you said before, when you talked about the big picture. You mentioned something about being at the top of the Christmas tree?

Rooney: My little thing I made up, because, if you understand, like, if you look at Illinois', the coal mining kind of comes down in sort of an angle in Illinois, and Cherry is right up there at that top. You know, Illinois goes all the way down like this, all coal mining, all the way down from Cherry. So, it kind of has that shape of the Christmas tree, and Cherry is so much at the top of that.

Again, I said, leaving right at the top, the train track only went into Cherry from the south. The train had to back up to Ladd to get out. It's the ultimate end of the line. I always felt like everyone was kind of looking up at it. Nineteen hundred and four was very late, one of the last mines built in the state. So, again, what I

always say is, they had 75 years to use their experience, and Cherry is going to be perfect, you know.

If you look at what the early plan was, all premeditated…They picked out a spot, named the streets after mine managers, named the town after a mine manager, owned the stores, owned the schools, owned the grain elevator. It was, "Now is our chance to just do this absolutely perfect." So, it was really unique, in that sense, unique geographic location.

It created a little interesting thing, I think. Think about that a little bit, and that means that…I'll say it like this, for years and years, even last week, when we have our ceremonies, we'll have a representative there from United Mine Workers. I don't mean to be mean, but we really don't know anything about coal mining up there.

You have to understand what Cherry was, right? It was a little offshoot. We're not central Illinois or southern Illinois and go into great details and understand coal mining. That was just a brief, little blip, up that far. It would be like going into southern Illinois and talking about, I don't know what. You know, something that just…You know what I'm saying? It's kind of a unique situation there.

I always laugh, because I think the United Mine Workers think that we're very coal mine oriented. We're not. We had this little blip, this little point at the top, for a brief period and then pulled back, and all went south. Coal mining is not something that we know much about or even care much about. The story for us, in Cherry, for me, it's that whole ethnic story and the story of heroes and the story of, you know—

Czaplicki: So, the identification then, it's not, this is mining; this is our heritage.

Rooney: We don't really recognize that, and that has been going on for a hundred years, those speeches. I watch the eyes in Cherry roll back, because we haven't mined coal up there in ninety years. We're just this brief little tick.

Czaplicki: And that's what the speeches are—

Rooney: Everyone, it's a misunderstood thing that this is about coal mining. Cherry is not about coal mining. It's a story of these immigrants that came over in this unique meld that went on.

We should be proud of our ancestors. My grandfather, that left his country to come here to create a better life for us, and the risks he took and the work he took. He risked his whole life, so that we could have a better life. We should be proud of them, no matter what, actually.

At the same time, I think Cherry was a special opportunity, where these men really stepped up and gave their lives on the rescue cage. So, I really feel like it was very symbolic to kind of drive home, you know, that we should really be proud of our ancestry, whether there was a disaster or not.

But, I always tell the story of the individual men that day. I'll talk about Mr. Flood, who was a clothier. I know right where his store was. And I'll tell the story of…"Now on that day, what was he doing at 1:20?" You know, he was an Irishman, and he was kind of out in front of his story. He might have been thinking about dinner and there's a…He was Irish, but in the last couple of years, he'd met these Italians. He could smell the Italian food coming out of Tom Buffo's Tavern, right there. He thought that, maybe on Saturday night, that's where I'll go for dinner. What's interesting about that is that, if you stood right on that same spot on the sidewalk today, at 4:00 on a Saturday, you'd smell that same smell, coming out of that same building. It's not that far off.

So, how did Mr. Flood find out about the fire? I think a farmer might have come down the main street, had gone by the mine, and said, "Hey, Mr. Flood, I see some smoke at the mine." So, Mr. Flood, I feel like he could have gone into this store and said to his brother, Neddie, "I better go check that out." Now, Mr. Flood had come out onto the street and headed north to the mine.

No. If you and I were standing there, we know what a smart Irishman would do. He'd cut right through the back of the store and up the alley and right to the edge of the hotel, because that was a quick shot. You could see the mine, right from there. But, when he went around that corner by the hotel, did he see Mrs. Howard, who ran the hotel? She had two boys in the mine, right then. Did he see her? Was she out on the porch when he came around that corner?

When he came around that corner, you could see that smoke at the mine. And that means…I wondered, did he pick up his pace, then? Because, if you live in Cherry, it'll take you a few minutes, then, to get up to the mine. He was standing at that pit, with the flames coming out, and they're asking for volunteers. He raised his hand and got on. And so, maybe that's how life is. Within a few minutes, he was thinking about what to have for dinner. The next thing, he was standing at that pit.

I've always been interested in that story of the heroes, not the seventh trip that everyone's so interested in, where everyone died. I was always interested in the sixth trip, because, as I've gotten older, and you get to be a man, you start to realize what's up in the world. On the sixth trip, they knew they weren't going to come out of that. It may have the seventh or the eighth or the ninth, but they were going to die there. And yet they all got back on again.

And, so, I think my point was, and what I said…For instance, the other day, at the ceremony, there was a flood on one of the little excursion trips we had going around town. I said, I always felt like that's the kind of thing that you should really be proud, that that's down in your bloodstream somewhere. And when somebody raises their hand and says, "Who'd have the guts to do that today?" maybe you would, you know? Maybe you do, you know. If your grandfather did, maybe you've got the guts.

So, I kind of think that they might have been going to a factory or some other…The fact that it's coal mining is a little, almost, overdone. It's the whole other story. That's what it's all about, the human factors.

Czaplicki: This raises a couple of questions for me. One might be, as you said, there's a lot of different ways of looking at this, and there's a lot of different forms of memory that come out of this. So, one thing I'm hearing from you is that you would say that now, people don't really…If they don't look at it as a coal mining story, do they still see any kind of a labor element? Do they see it as sort of like, "Wow, I understand this is somebody who doesn't have a very good job." Or, "I understand this is somebody who has really hard work, like these poor guys were in that same situation."

Or is labor just not part of it all? Is it just sort of the individual misfortune and bravery that happened that day?

Rooney: Well, that's almost the beauty of this story, see, and why the people that are interested, maybe are interested. I'm telling you my view, which I'm very excited about, and I'm interested in. But I think other people view it differently. There are definitely people with a labor interest, you know, that really zoom in on that. I know that labor was highly involved in the anniversary. I'm not very labor aware. I don't really know—

Czaplicki: I guess I was thinking about, not so much outside groups or historians sitting around, but I'm thinking, when you say that, you attend one of these memorial services, and up gets the UMW guy, and he starts talking, and you said you saw peoples' eyes rolling in the back of their head.

So, the eye rollers…Do you ever hear them talk about it, just more abstractly, as kind of…Working class might be too strong of a word, but you know, this is just—

Rooney: I feel like that, when the UMW gets up there, they really talk a lot about mining, and they talk about mining going on today. They talk about the history of mining. And that's really such a distant thing for those folks. The mine only existed for fifteen years, a hundred years ago. So, it's not as…

All these people are from southern Illinois, and they're not normally Italians or Polish or Irish. Our whole community, it's more about the whole ethnic thing, even now. You know, it's strange. It seems like someone should be up there from the National Italian Association or the national…talking about its place in history, in general.

I don't want to belittle the coal mine folks, but, you know what I'm saying, people just generally, up there, aren't that interested. You'd have to hear it. It can go on for ten or fifteen minutes, and they're not that interested in that piece of it.

Czaplicki: That is very interesting. It's almost—

Rooney: People take it for granted that they should, because it was a coal mine, and they're not [interested].

Czaplicki: Do you think, though, that, even if the way they tell the story, they're kind of missing a key element of appeal to the people currently alive in the town. But, if the national Italian groups aren't talking about it or the Polish or Lithuanian, then, are they still playing an important role? They might be telling too reductive of a story, or they're harnessing the story too much for their own purposes. But do you think they still have an important role in keeping it alive?

Rooney: Yeah, I really think that the whole thing, at this point, is sort of…You know, I view it as a teamwork thing. How would I say this? I think the greater days of Cherry Mining Disaster lore are still ahead of us. I watched this book come out; I watched what happened last weekend; I understand what this story is. I think it's just one that people don't fully understand the complexities, and it wasn't…You know, we talked before about why it wasn't more well-known. There are lots of mine disasters.

A book was written one hundred years ago, 1,000 newspaper articles, with those boring facts; one book, about eight years ago, that's gotten some good publicity, which is a great thing. The movie rights were created, and the movie rights were sold, from the book, from Karen Tintori's book. But, one of the things that would really help would be the creation of a Cherry Mine Disaster Historical Society.

I know that we have a problem with that, because Cherry's a pretty small town. We're right in the middle of it now. The e-mails are flying right now, about how we can do that. And one of the goals is the effort to raise awareness and publicity. One of the goals is to make sure…We had a member suggest that it should be part of history books. What do we do to lobby state boards of education or other educational entities and textbook companies?

Well, that all takes formal organization and some funds and a formal lobbying effort. Cherry has never had any of those things, after all these years. So, I guess the good news is, I feel like this is all right. The dance is going, right now.

Czaplicki: So, let me take you back then. Thinking back to your youth, growing up in Cherry, [it] sounds like what you're describing is something that's just in the air, and it's all around, this memory and this legacy. But when can you first recall hearing about Cherry's mining disaster?

Rooney: The one thing I'll tell you that's important is, in the '70s, the whole town was 80-year-old children of miners. Everyone on my block was 80 years old and was the child of a miner. So, for those people, the disaster was *yesterday,* and some still spoke broken English. The whole ethnic piece was really heavily in the air.

So, when I first heard, it was probably from my mother and the fact that her father had been in there that day and got out. Down at our church hall, they had these old pictures that were on the wall. I would like any event where the church hall was open, because I would go in there, as soon as the door opened. I wouldn't eat the fried chicken or go to the ravioli supper; I just stood on a chair and kept moving the chair around to look at these sheets of these pictures.

But our neighbor was a fellow named Pete Donna [D-o-n-n-a]; he was Italian. He was from Braidwood. He had the reputation as the last survivor of the mine disaster, which, it turned out later, that that wasn't quite accurate. There was at least one other miner, in Arizona. But Pete was quite a storyteller, and he had a great memory.

That's who I lived next to. I'd sit on the porch every day, and there's people now that even know me as the kid that hung out with Pete Donna. I would ride around with him in his truck, and he remembered everything about where everyone lived. He was quite a storyteller. So, I definitely had a great start on this whole interest.

Czaplicki: Do you have siblings?

Rooney: I have an older brother and a younger sister.

Czaplicki: Did they share your interest, or were you kind of strange, off on your own? (laughter)

Rooney: I would say that no one shared the interest quite like I did. I mean, that was my passion. Everyone has their passion, and that was mine. So, I remember a couple of times, when, you know…You learn, when you talk to people about your passion, you get to a certain age, where you realize just not everyone is as interested as you are.

Czaplicki: I've heard that a few times.

Rooney: Yeah, we all do. You get to a certain age…I was probably well into my thirties, before I sort of slowed down on that. They're interested, but not to the degree I am. They're definitely interested, but it's not to that degree.

There are a lot of other people approaching me. You know, those 2,000 people that were there the other day? I had people, five and six people deep, waiting to talk to me about their little family story, their little piece they were trying to get answers on.

Czaplicki: So, genealogy is a very important component in the current interest? Your neighbors, including one particularly special neighbor, because it is a small town…When you were living there, growing up, how many people, about, would you say—

Rooney: Still 550, about the same, yeah.

Czaplicki: So, right, very small town, people very familiar with each other. The church has the pictures up. Were there other events that would help keep it alive, or is it mainly more of this informal, neighbor-to-neighbor type conversation?

Rooney: Well, remember, the whole town had this feel of being eighty years old, and the main street looked a lot like it did then, with a lot of the same buildings. And the whole town…You see, the interesting thing about company houses, these company houses that…You know, I talk about the perfect town. But what they really are are cheap, temporary housing that we've been living in for a hundred years.

My mother lives in a company house for the last eighty-seven years. The whole town was company houses then. In a way, it didn't look much different than had in 1909. Company houses were just…There was very little new construction.

Czaplicki: So, even the physical layout—

Rooney: The physical layout was the same.

Czaplicki: You can't really escape it, because you're in the same place.

Rooney: That's right. We live in a company house. I mean, Tony Pogee had a miner's bucket, hanging on his well. Pete Donna didn't have indoor plumbing. He had no electricity. He was our neighbor. His brother, Dick Donna, lived north of him. He had no indoor plumbing or no running water. And Dick Lord was a coal miner that lived across the alley. He didn't have a telephone or running water. None of them had telephones.

Czaplicki: And what year was this?

Rooney: Nineteen seventy-seven (cough).

Czaplicki: Wow.

Rooney: Yeah. For me, it was in the air. Pete had a pick, sitting right by the front door that he used for certain things. That was his pick, you know. It was sixty years old. Like I said, Tony Pogee had a miner's lunch bucket hanging on his well, in the back, that he pumped water into. So, it was a sixty-year-old lunch bucket that he watered his tomatoes with.

Czaplicki: If I could walk you through it for a second, you know, you're ten years old or something, and you're walking around. Was this the kind of thing where you would ask, Mr. Pogee, "What's that pick laying by your door?" And he would, then, tell you a story of the mine.

Or is it more, you picked up bits and pieces of it at a time? Or is it more, even someone else would tell you? Someone would say, "See that pick over by Tony Pogee's house? That's what it's for."

Rooney: For whatever reason…I kind of thought, maybe that's why I was here today. I went around, and I would just sit and talk to people for hours and just ask them a million questions about things like that.

I wrote some of it down, and a lot of it, I didn't write down. So, a lot of times, people have said I need to. I'm not taking the time to write it down. So, I need to somehow get those things documented. So, that's what I did, because that's what I like to talk about. Older folks will talk to you all day, if you want, about little things like that.

Czaplicki: I did the same thing as a kid, incidentally. So, I understand what you're talking about.

Rooney: It doesn't seem strange to us, does it? It seems cool.

Czaplicki: There's a little bus that would go to the mall, and I would ride the bus. Often, the only other folks on it, many times, would be elderly, because it picked up by an old folks home. They would tell me about my town, and I would listen, and I would ask questions.

Rooney: I still really, sort of, I'll say, do well with (laughter) older folks, you know? I like older folks. You know, my mother is eighty-seven and didn't have me until she was forty. Her father didn't have her until he was fifty. My grandpa Marchetti would be a hundred and thirty years old; my grandfather would be a hundred and thirty. Not many people my age can say that.

My mother spoke Italian, before she went to school. They didn't teach her English, so she's almost from another time, anyway. She's older, and she was raised in such a way, even my own mother was from another time. My Dad was like that too.

My Dad would be ninety years old. He grew up on a farm and went to a one-room schoolhouse and took a wagon to school, my Dad. I just kind of grew up in an environment that was…The neighbors were all older, and lived in a town in the middle of nowhere, where people didn't even have…They were just living in sort of a past time anyway. So, I was kind of surrounded by all that and liked it.

Czaplicki: Would they speak freely about the disaster, or was it something that was so traumatizing that you didn't really hear a lot, in the same way people might talk about veterans? You know, we talk to guys in World War II, and a lot of guys don't really talk about it much.

Rooney: The old timers would, the ones who were there, who I wasn't exposed to too many, see. A lot of them had died. I think black lung kind of took your real miners out. Who was left were the sons and daughters of coalminers. They would all comment, yeah, that the people who were really there…My own grandfather, supposedly, didn't talk much about it.

The other thing was people I grew up with weren't very, I'll say, romantic. They talked about nuts and bolts and food and eating and work and tell just stories about people. But they didn't spin things in much of a romantic way or see them in a romantic way, like, I think, I sort of saw things.

Czaplicki: Would there be references to the disaster? You mentioned that there were pictures on the walls in church. Would there be either, or maybe both…Would there be special memorial services or, even in the run of the regular services, would there ever be references to the disaster, the lessons or prayers offered or anything like that?

Rooney: Yes, kind of, unfortunately, yes. I think it all led to the sort of…If it wasn't expressed in a romantic way and kind of over and over and over again, it was just kind of…I hate to use the word boring, but there were a lot of people that definitely didn't have the interest that I did, didn't see it, in a way. It was so long ago. It was a bunch of black and white pictures, and nobody had even read Buck's book, the 1910 book, which is very good.

Frank Buck's book, from 1910, is very romantic, has a little bit of that, is a Victorian spin to telling a story in an exciting way. It's very good. Very few people even read that. So, it's just kind of, every year, a little thing in the paper or little thing in church, and people aren't very romantic around there, anyway. So, it didn't have much…They didn't see it in the pizzazzy way I do.

But they do now, the people involved, mostly from out of town. Can you imagine that the mayor of Cherry only expected a few hundred people, and they got 2,000? I mean, he only expected three hundred people or four hundred, and they got 2,000.

I had predicted that they would have that many, because I get letters from all over the country. Think of the ones that couldn't be there that day. That means there was another thousand that would have liked to…would have intended to be there and couldn't make it.

Czaplicki: I want to ask you about that. But, just before I do, what church did you go to?

Rooney: I went to Holy Trinity Church in Cherry. My mother was the first baby baptized there.

Czaplicki: Really?

Rooney: Yeah. She still sits in the same pew. Think of her life, huh.

Czaplicki: Would it give mass in different languages or was English—

Rooney: Right when I was a kid. It had that in Latin. Then they switched over, right when I was a kid. There's a Congregational church there too, but the town, to me, has always been 90% Catholic.

Czaplicki: Given some of the ethnicities you were talking about, moving there, that makes sense.

Rooney: Really ethnic, yeah. It's really a Catholic town.

Czaplicki: Well then, to get back to what you were just saying, before I interrupted you there, yeah, all these outsiders are coming in. Now, outsiders came in back then too, right, by the thousands?

Rooney: That's right.

Czaplicki: I wanted to ask you—because I didn't notice anybody mentioning this in the things I read—did the railroad make money off of them, like they had to pay to take those trains? Or were these special trains, just bringing the onlookers, or they caught a ride, when they moved the fire equipment? Or were they actually selling tickets to come see this disaster?

Rooney: No, I didn't see that. As a matter of fact, the numbers they toss around, if you do the math, it seems hard to believe that they could actually have gotten that many. But they came in by some cars, a lot of wagons.

They show a picture in Ladd, where people are just packed on the train, like even standing on the engine. I'd never heard that the mine made money on that. But, of course, you know who flocked there were the photographers. The penny postcard photographers flooded in. That's why there's hundreds and hundreds of pictures, from different angles. You'll see a lot of the postcards that were mailed from Cherry. "Hey, I'm here in Cherry. I'm right where the excitement's at, and this is what we can see."

Czaplicki: So, people, then, definitely have that post-disaster tourism. I mean, the people separate from the people who are coming to give aid, just the people who are walking around to be close to this thing. Do you think there's something similar going on now? I mean, beyond the folks who are interested in their genealogy, do you see people who don't have a direct connection to the town?

Rooney: I would call it the exact opposite. I think the people who were there, all had, maybe, a little bit or a lot of what I'm talking about, just really intrigued by the complexity of, you know. I've watched the light go on in their head. I think most people were really, really there for some sincere interest. Some of them are sort of fulfilling a…

I mean, there was a couple there from North Carolina, who had no relatives there, had never been to Cherry, had just read Karen's book. I asked him, I said, "What about this story really intrigued you?" It was just something about the twenty-

one men, being in the mine and being together, of different ethnicities and different religions, being completely in darkness for eight days and saying prayers together and just facing death and then, coming out of it. He said, "That was my most interesting part, and so we flew all the way out here, from North Carolina. Never been out here." It can catch people like that.

Czaplicki: I want to ask you about them—the group of men that they were talking about, also known as the eight day miners—because they survived behind the rock wall that they constructed. Do you think the discovery of them helped reduce some of the tension in the town? Or could you speculate as to how important the discovery is?

Rooney: Briefly.

Czaplicki: Because, the way I understand the story, is the mayor and the sheriff were asking the saloon keepers to lock down. And the National Guard was finally called up, secretly, because of some supposed rumor, dynamite plot, of these leaders on the train.

So, it made me wonder how close the town may have been to coming apart at the seams, and if finding these guys alive the next day, switched it a little bit, if that story could have ended up being a very different story, without finding those guys when they did.

Rooney: I never thought of that, but, you know, it's an interesting point. There were rumors that went around that they were *all* alive. Yeah, rumors went around that they were all alive. So, you can imagine, every widow thought that their husband was alive for a second or hoped and ran. Of course, there was only twenty out of two hundred-seventy or eighty [that survived].

But, I would say, for a brief period, it raised everyone's excitement up. You know, they were optimistic for a brief period, maybe just for a few hours, until they figured out who was really amongst those living. Then, it kind of settled back in. It might have—now that you mentioned it—maybe it deflected things in a different direction. You know, the tension was really rising, and that's kind of created another little thought pattern, and then, sort of another period of grief, almost, you know?

Czaplicki: The dynamite plot. What was that again, exactly? Was it people from Cherry, who supposedly wanted to blow up the train of the owners, or was it the people from outside the town, who were going to do this.

Rooney: They didn't like the strategy to seal the mine. It seemed like the strategy to seal the mine was to cut off oxygen and just kill any hope of anyone living. They just didn't think that would be a good move, and they were so desperate.

Think about those widows, at that point. What they would do is, they would go every day to the mine and stand there, even though the miners were down 350 and 500 feet, in a sealed mine. Why did they go stand up there? What else were they

going to do? They felt just a little closer by just going up there and standing there. I think I would do the same thing myself.

And I tell the story that, imagine…I told my mother this. We live across the street from the long row, the widow's row. Are you familiar with that part of the story?

Czaplicki: No, only that I know there was a major demographic. What, four out of five men died or something like that number?

Rooney: There's one street that's well publicized. They show pictures of it. There were thirty-seven exact houses in a row.

Czaplicki: The long row?

Rooney: The long row or widow's row. There were thirty-seven houses and thirty-four widows. And I told my mother—I was there at her house—we grew up in a company house, across the street from that. I said, "Imagine a hundred years ago tonight, that thirty-four husbands didn't come home, at the houses that are right across from our street here.

In those days, that wasn't even the end of it. Those widows thought that that was the end of them, that they would die. They didn't know what relief was. If they did, they wouldn't have comprehended what relief was. They thought that the bread winner was gone; they were dead. They were going to die right there. They'd have no food and no money.

Czaplicki: There's no welfare state.

Rooney: There's no welfare. So, imagine. So, thirty-four widows and a one hundred and fifty children, or whatever, in that long row there that night…I told Mom, "Imagine if there was one widow tonight, one widow across the street there. Wouldn't that be a big deal, thirty-four widows in one night? What do the kids say to each other, when they walked outside? All their dads were all gone. Do the widows cluster together? Do the Italian women cluster a little, with the Lithuanian women?

Czaplicki: That's what I was going to ask, if that might have been part of the—

Rooney: I don't know. I guess the thing about this, too, for me is, if you can imagine, if I had one wish, I'd like to go back to Cherry for an hour. I'd like to go back, you know. When it gets in your mind, you kind of wonder how things were, and what was it like there that night, on that row? And what was going on from a communication standpoint? Who was talking to who?

When that gets in your head, and you wonder about it, you just can't…it's sort of a thirst, you can't…Maybe all history people are like that. That's what they really

want, is just one hour, one hour in Dodge City, one hour in Cherry, one hour at Capone's gang coming out.

Czaplicki: That's why the story of you is so interesting. You didn't get the hour, but you still got pieces, you know, it's all these artifacts and the actual people.

Rooney: That environment that was there and those people, it wasn't that far away from me. So, if I had that level of historical interest and there was such a weird, unique situation, with the setting being the same and the people kind of, almost being the same. Yeah, and an interesting story on top of it. So, I always felt like I might open my eyes one morning, and I'd be there.

Czaplicki: I was going to ask you a couple of things about that. You know how some kids grow up playing cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians. Would you guys ever play Cherry mine disaster roles? Did that ever happen?

Rooney: I don't remember that. I don't remember that we did that. I know that there was a book at the library that was about coal mining. It was a Golden Book, those little Golden Books. It was about a couple of coal miners, and it told their story of what they did every day. I checked it out so many times that Mrs. Connelly wouldn't let me check it out any more. It was the only book I read in the library. It was just that book about those coal miners.

But I don't remember us playing much. The other kids didn't have the interest that I did. I don't remember anyone my age, at that time, having the interest that I did.

Czaplicki: Or even playing as miners, not necessarily disaster—

Rooney: I think they actually would have called it boring. You know, I just really thought it was the coolest thing ever, and I don't remember anybody even thinking it was less than, I don't know what. It was pretty…

Czaplicki: I was reading an article recently in the *Peoria Star Journal*. I think that that's the name of the paper. It was talking about the current reaction to the exhibit, our very excellent exhibit, which, I understand, you had some involvement with, and…if I could find it here…

There was a quote from one of the students. They, sort of, asked him what he thought about it. His response was, "It was such a tragedy, but, being in a small town, being recognized, is kind of cool." I was wondering what you think of that response.

Rooney: I thought the same thing myself. I wondered if the kids wouldn't, themselves, because, with 2,000 people there, I think I almost saw the look on the people from Cherry's faces and the kids' faces, that some of them came here and saw the display. Yeah, I think the people in Cherry are really on a high, right now, that they just really

didn't appreciate what a big deal it was, how many other people would be interested, how potentially big and interesting it could be.

Now, I'll tell you something that, when I went to Cherry, they asked me to be sort of the tour guide on this little…it was like a little bus that went around, with about thirty people on it. We made our way up to the mine, and we circled around, and we went through sort of a little neighborhood that had company houses and passed where the depot was and then, out to the cemetery. So, you know, probably like yourself, I had forty-seven years to…They said, "Do you want to rehearse?" And I said, "No." (laughs)

So, I did these tours, 18 of these tours. To be honest with you, and not really to toot my own horn, but I said exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. And I have gotten so many compliments and e-mails and letters about how much people enjoyed the little speech I had. I'm not giving myself much credit; it's just the story, you know, as I see it. Anybody could really tell it, if they just looked at it.

There were people from Cherry that I could just tell, the look on their face and the things they said to me, after all these years, it wasn't really spun like that before.

Czaplicki: They looked at their town differently, after you—

Rooney: The story is so easily spun. Ninety-nine percent of the time, here's a year; here's the date; here's how much coal; here's how many men died; here's how they identified the bodies; here's where they buried them, just these really plain facts, you know, without any…where you personify things, you know, none of that.

Really, when you do and you really have this all worked out, that's what makes it the really interesting story. I just really feel, if you spoke to those people, they would all go, "I really had no idea, myself. It's right across the street. I knew it was kind of a good story. But, boy, when you really spin it like that, look at the big picture and where this fit in, and then, look at all these other factors and these little angles, and let's talk about Mr. Flood and what he did that day."

You and I could be standing there, and let's put that into terms of us today, you know. How would we react, right now? Or how would we have reacted then? I can look around, and you look in Cherry, and you're like, "Well, you got the men on the rescue cage and their names." You say, "Well, there's Flood's family, and there's Walter Waite's family." The families are right there; these names are right there, and, at times, we'll introduce them.

Families that haven't spoken to each other in a hundred years, you know, they have a very tight coupling in the story. And I'll say, "Okay, well, you know, Waites, meet the Browns." That actually happened, and they came together. Their grandfathers came over from England together and were together in the mine, eight days, and they met each other that day.

Czaplicki: So, most of the old timers then, that you grew up talking to, are they all gone?

Rooney: I can't really think of anybody I'd put in that category, probably, other than my own mother, now, at eighty-seven. I wish I'd taken a lot more tape recordings. But I did take some decent notes on a few things, and the rest of it's in my head, a couple of recordings, but not much.

Czaplicki: Did anybody film? You told me about these tours you led, and they sound wonderful. I wish Dennis had packed you off, with one of these, [recorders], just to put on the bus and ride around with.

Rooney: I'll be doing them again. I really think we could do a small event every year.

Czaplicki: Did anybody film it; do you know?

Rooney: No, nobody filmed it. I think we're organized enough to be dangerous right now. What it is, it's the group that organizes is very hard working, but, again, it's not formally organized. So, you just only get things done…I mean, it went great, but it could be even better.

Czaplicki: So, back to this kid reacting to the exhibit, part of where I was going with that question is, as great as it is that they're, in a way, reconnecting with this other generation. And with old timers going, it sounds like the bridge has gotten very narrow. You may be the bridge, or you might be a timber. But it's not a very big bridge anymore.

But, is there also a danger in…Do you worry that there might just be celebrity for celebrity's sake? Like, "Oh, wow, something big happened in Cherry." Or "We're on the map." But all these other, passionate lessons that you're talking about—the individual heroism and the ethnic story and that kind of stuff—do you worry that they might not be getting that message? It may just be, to them, like something big; something once happened here, but they don't probe it deeper.

Rooney: Yes. Yes. And so, the real story is that, if we could document, really, the little speech that I gave and the way I did it, just adds that little flavor. *This* is what I'm talking about, and then, build on just that theme. Somehow get that document into film or into something and build off again, "It's not so much what you say; it's how you say it," I think that would be the key to just really keeping everyone's interest. And the other kids need to hear it told in that way. You have to hear all those little ins and outs and those factors.

Czaplicki: I just realized, one of the issues that I forgot to ask you about, was growing up. We had the town, the architecture, your neighbors, the church. In your schools, did you learn about it in class at all? Were the teachers you had in school from Cherry, or were they outsiders who maybe it didn't mean as much to?

Rooney: I did go to school. The school was built by the mine, and that's the school I went to and my mother went to. The teachers were all older teachers, but no, I don't remember even that we…(sigh) The story was just always the same

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Every November, they would read the little article, out of the paper. It was very boring, and the teachers never did what I'm describing. You just have to see things in that way. People either didn't care or didn't see them in that way. I really don't remember anyone that just kind of told it in that way, honestly.

Czaplicki: Have you visited schools yourself, since that time?

Rooney: Yeah. I wish I could do more, but I've done some. I think, though, I'll say the best job I ever did was, no doubt, just the other day. I did it eighteen times, in two days, so—

Czaplicki: You've still got your voice.

Rooney: Yeah, I still have my voice, sure. You know, I can see, I think we have something kind of at play here, you know. I think we kind of need to take advantage of it now. There's a sense of urgency here. We need to the Historical Society going, and if we don't…

If I was retired, and I lived up there, I'd love to be right in there. But I don't, so we have to find some other people to lead it. Then, the telling of that story, what can I say, except that a hundred times over, it's not what you say; it's how you say it. And if you say that right…I saw the people hear that story and how they laughed when it was time to laugh, and they rolled their eyes when it was time to roll their eyes, and they cried when it was time to cry. This all has to be told…just like that.

Czaplicki: Certainly. Well, again, this was sort of a quick overview of what is, obviously, a really rich, deep vein, to use the metaphors of the subject matter in your brain. I wish we would have more time to go more into it. But I wanted to give you an opportunity to…I mean, is there anything you'd like to bring up, right now, on the table, that I haven't asked you about or any examples or any stories you want to tell that really stand out in your mind?

Rooney: Well, again, I think I really had thought about the high points. I already mentioned what I think should be important to people today. That is, down in their bloodstream somewhere, everything that our grandfathers and grandmothers did, whether it was a disaster or not, it was heroism in one way or another.

But, in terms of individual stories, again, the problem is that there's just an infinite number. I can say this, that there are still these little mysteries that are still kind of being solved. They're still going on right now. It's usually related to how many men were actually killed, and what really were their names? And some men who were buried as unidentified, and why are they buried as unidentified, and who were they really?

And, of course, there were a couple of men that left town, right after the disaster, that were sort of viewed as the antagonists for a long time. Our research associate is kind of tracking them down and really where they went. It's not like it's over. There's still these little mysteries that are kind of going on now.

And people are motivated to do things, like mark the graves of the unmarked miners, and update some of the stones that are fading, and rebuild some of the company houses, so that younger children can see what a company house really looked like; and rebuild a mine manager's house, so they can see a little bit of what that's all about; and move the mine office building back to the site. They actually know where it's at, the mine office.

So, there's a lot of activity. People are kind of excited about it. There's lots of things to do, this effort related to the textbooks. So, I guess I would just say that. There's just a lot going on.

Czaplicki: So, ideally, you think there'd be almost, like, just down the street here, I have Lincoln's home. When I showed up, I just expected to see Lincoln's home. I didn't realize that they had actually—

Rooney: The whole neighborhood.

Czaplicki: …it was Lincoln's whole neighborhood. So, that's kind of more of the vision of what you'd like to see happen in Cherry?

Rooney: Oh, yeah, I can see the houses right now, and, you know, to have a company house redone, a true miner's company house, where the whole yard would be a garden, and it would have an outhouse, and the inside would have a coal stove and some of those things, like that, I think, would be really cool for everyone, especially school kids, to see. This is how these people lived, you know. So, yeah, yeah, some of those things like that. So, they're on the table.

One thing that's really cool has to do with people's, individual family histories, in creating sort of a website that has the emphasis on content management, where you let the families update their own little sections. That would really be awesome. There's a lot of people who want something like that. And they want to be able to cross-reference these families, back and forth, and make contact with those relatives. There's thousands of people who want to do that.

Czaplicki: Well. This has been a fascinating, brief tour. Actually, I hope I do get the opportunity to go out, if you give another one of these tours.

Rooney: Oh, yeah.

Czaplicki: I'm going to talk to Dennis about doing that. But, if there's nothing else you'd like to add to that, then I think we're done. Thank you very much for coming in to talk to us.

Rooney: Thank you. Sorry about that cough.