Forty one years ago, Irving Derouen was looking for a new job - what he found was an adventure, 1,300 feet below the surface of the earth.

Derouen is a salt miner, one of more than 200 people employed by Akzo Salt on Avery Island. When Derouen first started at the mine in 1949, he was 21 years old and wanted a job that would give him security, he said.

"I was raised on the other end of Avery Island Road and I used to walk up to the mine a couple times a month to see if they were hiring. After about a year, I finally got on," Derouen explained.

With the exception of a brief layoff in 1951 and two years service in Korea, Derouen has worked at the mine all his life, first for International Salt Company and then for Akzo Salt Inc. Akzo acquired International in 1988.

Derouen says of all the experiences in the mine, the most memorable is the time he took directions from a mechanic named Nuco, who retired several years ago.

"My first week, some of the older miners sent me through the mine to get Nuco," Derouen said.

"After I found him, Nuco told me to take a shortcut back to my work area. I was driving a big school bus and ended up in a small room with no way out," he continued.

He sends between 250 and 270 skips up the hoist each shift - the skips hold 19 tons of salt each, he explained.

Although he has held a number of positions in the mine through the years, being a footman is his favorite.

He said he was allowed to choose the position due to seniority.

Derouen works alone most of the day.

"All day long the only people I see are those who pass by in the trucks and my foreman who checks to make sure everything's OK," he said.

"I enjoy what I do. It's all I've ever known. Most people can't understand what it's like down here," Derouen explained. "They have to see the mine for themselves. To me, it's like a little city of lights."

In a year and a half, Derouen is planning to retire.

"This mine was my future," he said. "I raised my family here. Paid my home. Everything I have came from this company and I appreciate all of it."