**LU 020 Script - The Art of Oral History**

I’m Clark Grant and this is our final episode of Life Underground. To finish out this documentary series about Butte, Montana, I wanted to give an overview of the Verdigris Project as a whole and talk a bit about the five year journey to create and manage this project with our team.

When I was the general manager for KBMF radio in Butte, back in 2016, my friend Larry Hirshberg sent me an email about a post he’d seen calling for grant applications for the National Endowment for the Humanities. They had a grant program opening up called Creating Humanities Communities, and it was basically a way for cultural institutions in rural areas to form partnerships that would highlight the humanities in their town. The humanities include the study of languages and literatures, as well as the arts, history, and philosophy.

At our low power community radio station, we had already been doing interviews with people in Butte about the old days of mining and also more recent issues about Superfund, so right away we thought the Archives would be a great partner for this NEH project, and that the grant would allow us to really expand our recording projects by partnering with a parent institution.

The then-president and treasurer of our nonprofit organization, Regan deVictoria and John Conlan, helped me draft the application, but we needed a name for the project. Looking around at the aged beauty of Butte’s historic Uptown, there are quite a few architectural accents made of copper, and with a great patina after all these years. Regan took inspiration from that greenish blue that copper turns to after years of exposure, and the Verdigris Project had its name.

[music]

Our plan was actually quite ambitious, and to be honest, at the time I don’t think I really understood how much work it would all be. We made a pitch to record 100 oral history interviews at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. Aubrey Jaap would help us choose interviewees, assist with scheduling and actually conduct the majority of the interviews as well. Then, using some of those interview recordings along with some archival recordings from previous oral history projects, we would assemble a team an d produce three different radio series.

*Butte, America’s Story* would be a daily bite-sized podcast hosted by Dick Gibson that touched on Butte history from every angle, architectural, geological, and political. *Mining City Reflections*, hosted by author and retired educator Marian Jensen, would focus on the stories of women in Butte, particularly those of immigrant families. And then *Life Underground*, which I described once as the Ken Burns treatment of Butte history, sprawling, in-depth and comprehensive. Well, I definitely fell short of Ken Burns-level detail, but I think we did pretty good in covering a lot of important chapters in Butte history.

Along with all these recordings and broadcast productions, we would then hire a composer to create original music for all the programs, and we’d pay to have all of the oral history interviews transcribed, printed and delivered to participants. So it was a big project.

[music]

Months after we applied, we got a call from Senator Jon Tester’s Butte office with word that our grant application had been approved, and that was when the work actually began. This type of NEH award was a challenge grant, so that meant if the NEH was going to give us $30,000 to do the project, we had to raise a matching thirty thousand, dollar for dollar. So our small nonprofit was now tasked with raising the normal amount of money we needed to operate, and on top of that, another $30,000 to carry out the Verdigris Project. By the time it was said and done, we received support for this project from The Montana History Foundation, the Superfund Advisory & Redevelopment Trust Authority, the Friends of the Butte Archives, First Citizens Bank, Gretchen Geller, John Conlan, and dozens of generous donors to the Butte America Foundation. In the end, we met our goals and were somehow able to pull it off.

[music]

So today, I wanted to give the other members of the Verdigris team the chance to talk about the project a bit, and have them explain what they got out of it and what they think it accomplished.

[music]

When we did our oral history recordings on this project, they most often took place in the conference room on the second floor of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. I would bring my recording gear in a couple of briefcases and meet Aubrey Jaap a few minutes before our guest would arrive. Over the course of nearly 5 years, together we interviewed 100 people about their life history. Most of the interviews are about two hours long, and they cover someone’s personal history from their grandparents to present day. We developed a bit of a system by the end of it, and usually Aubrey would start the interview and conduct the first hour or so of questioning. While that was going on, I would make notes on topics I wanted to revisit, and in the second hour, I would ask questions. The result is a body of work that gives a very deep and wide impression of Butte over the last half century. Through those personal histories, we get a sense of Butte from a very personal vantage point.

Aubrey was the Administrative Assistant at the Archives when we first started the Verdigris Project. She then became the Assistant Director and after Ellen Crain retired in April of 2022, Aubrey became the Director. I interviewed her after our oral histories had all been completed, and asked her to tell me about her trajectory over the years at the Archives.

[Aubrey Jaap 1]

Aubrey touched on some of the memorable moments we had while collecting all these oral histories, including Korean War veterans and women who dealt with discrimination in their workplaces.

[Aubrey Jaap 2]

Oral history as an academic discipline has become more defined in recent years, but it is still different than other forms of history, and doesn’t quite come with the finality of facts and figures of the less subjective historical disciplines. Aubrey says it’s actually her favorite kind of historical source material.

[Aubrey Jaap 3]

[Aubrey Jaap 4]

[music]

That’s Aubrey Jaap, Director of the Butte-Silver Bow Archives, reflecting on our work for the Verdigris Project and the 100 oral histories we recorded together from 2017-2021. I’d like to make it clear that this project would not have gone anywhere without Aubrey, who not only conducted the interviews but ensured that folks were scheduled week after week and acted as the liaison for the Archives for all things Verdigris-related. She really did meet the goal of this NEH grant, which was to form a strong partnership between a cultural institution and a small nonprofit organization, the Butte America Foundation. Many thanks to her for her dedication to the project.

[music]

Like I said earlier, we did produce three distinct radio series with this project, in addition to our 100 oral histories. Historian and geologist Dick Gibson produced *Butte, America’s Story*, which was a 300 episode series on Butte history. I approached Dick before applying to the NEH for the original funding and asked him if he would want to do a podcast on Butte history.

[Dick Gibson 1]

[music]

[Dick Gibson 2]

That’s Dick Gibson, writer and producer of *Butte, America’s Story*. And today we’re doing a bit of a retrospective of the Verdigris Project with our team to look back on the five years of work that went into all this. Next we’ll visit with Marian Jensen, writer and producer of another Verdigris radio series, *Mining City Reflections.*

[music]

[Marian Jensen 1]

[Marian Jensen 2]

[music]

Marian used a lot of old and new oral history recordings in the production of her program. I asked Marian, and all of our teammates on the project in fact, to comment on the notion of oral history as a historical source itself.

[Marian Jensen 3]

[Marian Jensen 4]

[music]

Marian Jensen just mentioned our good bud Daniel Hogan, who took on the role of producer for *Mining City Reflections*. At the time, Daniel was the Program Director for KBMF radio, and he’s since become the General Manager at that radio station. He worked with Marian for over a year to record, edit and assemble 25 episodes of her program.

[Daniel Hogan 1]

[music]

[Daniel Hogan 2]

That’s Daniel Hogan, producer on the Verdigris Project who worked on one of three radio series we produced between 2017-2022. Now, of course we also recorded 100 new oral histories on top of making those three radio series we’ve been discussing. A major part of this grant project is the transcription of all 100 oral histories, work that has been shared among several people, but the bulk of which has been done so far by one man, Adrian Kien.

[Adrian Kien 1]

I asked Adrian what passages stuck out to him in all of his hours of work transcribing our oral history recordings.

[Adrian Kien 2]

[Adrian Kien 3]

[music]

That’s Adrian Kien, transcriber for the Verdigris Project, who is working to type out nearly 100 oral histories that we’ve recorded over the years.

[music]

For our final segment of *Life Underground*, we’ll talk to the man whose music has animated all these radio shows and guided the tone of a lot of my production work on the project. Stay with us.

[music]

Dr. Charles Nichols is a violinist and professor of Composition and Creative Technologies at Virginia Tech, though I met him years ago when he was teaching a summer recording class at the University of Montana. We’ve played music together for years in our band Modality, and when the Verdigris Project was taking shape and we needed some original music, I knew the man to ask.

[music]

Right after we got news of our award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, my dad died suddenly from a heart attack at home in Arkansas. When I went down that winter to spread his ashes with my brothers and be with our mom, I found some recordings on my dad’s computer of his harmonica playing. My dad had carried a harmonica for decades, and would often break it out and play along when folks were sitting around playing guitar at the house. It was always a treat to hear him play, so I was thrilled when I found those recordings after he died.

One day I got the idea that perhaps Charles could use my dad’s surviving harmonica recordings as the basis for his Verdigris music, and I called up Charles and ran the idea by him. Here he recalls the process of composing from there.

[Charles Nichols 1]

So here’s a sample of the original harmonica recording that I found on my dad’s computer:

[Dad Harp Sample]

And then here’s an example of what Charles ended up composing from that, which is the theme song for Marian’s program *Mining City Reflections.*

[Mining City Reflections Theme Song]

So we made all the radio series with the help of Charles’s music, and then I got to thinking how cool it would be if we could raise a bit more money and commission Charles to turn these short, one-minute themes into a larger piece, like a string quartet. I had just been so taken with how he’d transformed my dad’s musical remnants into these bigger ideas, and I really wanted to hear what those ideas might sound like in a more formal composition.

[Charles Nichols 2] – music at marker

[String Quartet Sample]

That’s Dr. Charles Nichols, composer of the music for the Verdigris Project, and underneath me now is the recording of the Cascade Quartet performing the piece he wrote. You can see a wonderful video of that performance in the newly renovated Carpenters Union Hall second floor from April of 2020 on the website, verdigrisproject.org.

[music]

Well I think we’ve about reached the end of my 20-part series on Butte history. *Life Underground* has been challenging and quite the education for me, and I hope you’ve enjoyed it too. I wanted to close the series with a quote from Ed Dobb, the famed author with Butte roots. I think it speaks to the importance of oral history and, if not recording, then at least just listening to our elders while we still have them around. It comes from a 1999 article in High Country News, called *Mining the Past.* Looking at the post-industrial fallout brought about from Butte’s unfettered capitalism, Dobb critiques that notion of progress.

He said, “They are the last surviving members of an occupational tribe that soon will be extinct. Their way of life, their subculture, is vanishing, as part of the transition to the so-called New West. Before their voices fall silent, consigning to oblivion all that they have seen and done, we might do well to pull up a chair and listen to their testimony, if for no other reason than to disabuse ourselves of the naive notion - a stubbornly Western notion, it should be admitted - that the future necessarily will be better than the past.”

[music]

This is *Life Underground* and I’m Clark Grant, and that concludes our series. Before we go, I need to acknowledge all the behind-the-scenes contributors to this project, including Butch Gerbrandt and Suzanne Stefanac, along with the rest of the Butte America Foundation board of directors, who helped guide the project and keep track of all the paperwork along the way. Many thanks as well to Ellen Crain. Also I should thank all the brave people of Butte who shared their life stories on the record. Without their willingness to open up, our project wouldn’t have gone very far. And finally, thank you to all those supporters of KBMF radio and the Archives who have let us know how much they’ve enjoyed this project, and who lent a hand or their financial support to make it happen.

Once again, you can find more about everything we discussed on the show today at verdigrisproject.org. Here’s hoping this collection brings value to people in Butte and beyond for years to come. Thanks for listening.

[music]

[credits]