Perdita Duncan Script

Welcome to Mining City Reflections where we examine Butte, Montana’s history through the stories and observations of Butte women throughout the twentieth century. Preserved in the Butte Archives’ extensive oral history collection, their vivid details and personal recollections bring to life the challenges and achievements of the boom to bust town.

Peppered with more than twenty-three ethnic groups who arrived in the first half of the last century, the Mining City’s history truly reflects the meIting pot image of America. But that image is not without tarnish.

In this segment we explore the experience of African Americans in Butte through the eyes of Perdita Duncan, an articulate and self-assured voice for those who endured discrimination not for their ethnicity or national origin but for the color of their skin. Perdita was born in Butte in 1927, the second of four children in the Duncan family. They were among the Mining City’s small black population that hovered around 2000, a scant 2% of the total.

While Jim Crow laws did not exist in Montana, African-Americans were not fully accepted in Butte. Though employment was available, the jobs for men usually existed in the service sector, such as railroad porters and valets, while the better paying jobs in the mines were off limits.

Nevertheless, Perdita’s father, John, who had studied podiatry, one of a handful in the state, and her mother, Armeta, who had trained as an elementary school teacher, stood as inspirational role models. They instilled a strong sense of achievement and identity in their children, all of whom pursued college educations.

Despite her education, Perdita’s mother had to take work as a domestic, but her refinement must have been noticed because she gained the attention of her employer, Cornelius Kelly, the Anaconda Mining Company’s longest serving president.

[1-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 7:41-9:02]

Perdita’s father possessed a worldly view, having been born in India and then educated in America. She still recalled his concerns for the state of the world while watching the Armistice Day celebration in Butte in 1917.

[2- Excerpt Duncan tape #1 - 13:09-13:33]

Though the Duncan household provided stability and a loving environment, life outside the home presented challenges. Perdita recalls her school days in Butte where discrimination was more subtle than other parts of the country but nonetheless present.

[3-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 17:36-59]

While the black churches served as a center for social as well as a religious life, they no doubt inspired Perdita’s love of music. She demonstrated talent at the piano at an early age, and her parents found Butte could provide her with rigorous music training in the classics including opera.

[4-Excerpt- Duncan tape #2 -25:53-27:06]

Once Perdita entered high school her social life suffered, but her music sustained her along with a kind-hearted principal who encouraged her. Her strength of character emerged.

[5-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 34:42-35:35]-[36:58-38:38]

Even with these difficulties, Perdita continued to pursue her lifelong passion for music and dancing at every turn. Imagine her amazement when a dance marathon showed up at the Knights of Columbus in Butte.

[6-Excerpt-Duncan tape #2 – 43:33 – 44:05]

Despite her experiences of isolation and discrimination, Perdita appreciated the opportunities before her. She considered her Butte High School education superior and felt ready to face the world after graduating.

[7-Excerpt – Duncan tape #2- 31:15-32:56]

Eventually Perdita left Butte for Ohio to attend Oberlin, the first white college to admit women and black students. But there was little opportunity to pursue a career in concert music.

[8-Excerpt - Duncan tape #1 - 42:11-42:45]

Unsure what profession to pursue, Duncan majored in sociology and English, and moved to New York City after graduation. Eventually she began a career in social work that lasted 37 years, taking law courses at St. John’s University, which led to a position in the legal division in New York City’s Department of Social Services. But she did not abandon her love of music. Instead Perdita also developed a second career as a classical music critic.

[9-Excerpt – Duncan Tape #1 – 45:09 – 46:28]

She spent her nights at Carnegie Hall and The Metropolitan Opera, in time reviewing performances in a column for the New York Amsterdam News, one of the largest black newspapers in the country. Her reviews even appeared in the New York Times. Once retired, she returned to Butte to care for her aging mother, continuing to write musical reviews, this time for the Montana Standard, the last in 1980. About growing up in Butte, Perdita said, “I learned very early that I was a colored girl growing up in a white community and that my name was Perdita Duncan. After that, nobody could crush me.” Perdita died at home in 1985 at the age of 76.

Mining City Reflections is a production of KBMF-LP and has been funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Permission for these recording has been provided by the Butte Silver Bow Archives, the Montana Historical Society and the University of Montana. Hear this program again at ButteAmericaRadio.org

Excerpts – 9 minutes