Welcome to Mining City Reflections where we illuminate the history of Butte, Montana through the stories and observations of 20th century women who lived there. I’m your host, Marian Jensen.

In this last installment in our oral histories about Butte’s Women’s Protective Union, we depart from our usual format. While the voices of its members bring to life the remarkable accomplishments of the organization to which they were all so dedicated, one voice is missing. Over and over we heard members recall the words and actions of Bridget Shea who served as President and walking delegate of the Union for 25 yrs. She was both feared and revered. Unfortunately, Shea died in 1955 at age of 79 long before any oral history project had begun.

What does remain, however, is the residence where she lived for 37 years. The city of Butte boasts one of the largest National Register-listed districts in the country, and the most National Register designated buildings in Montana. Bridget Shea’s house is among them.

Producer, Daniel Hogan and I visited the home to see what we might learn about Bridget Shea’s life during those years. Fittingly, the house’s current owner is yet another woman who also reveres the memory of Bridget Shea. Cindy Shaw, a member of the Butte Silver Bow Council of Commissioners and a prominent community leader, has lived in the former Shea home since 1996.

An historian herself, Shaw has researched the house’s history, and has even spoken with Bridget Shea’s relatives. She considers herself a custodian of the Shea legacy.

19:12- 20 - a steward of this house;

The brick workman’s cottage sits on West Quartz Street high above the Summit Valley floor, its original varnished woodwork and French hardwood floors still gracing the interior.

1:11 - 1:27 house built in 1885

Not surprisingly, the Shea’s bought a home in an area where they were surrounded by fellow Irishmen.

3:37-3:40 Neighbors were Lownys, Sullivans, Kearneys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD73lxnaPCE> - Galway Bay

Born in County Cork in 1876, Bridget Murphy had left Ireland at the turn of the century and immigrated to Butte. In ensuing months she met and married fellow Irishman, James Shea, a member of the Teamsters’ union who drove a horse-drawn wagon for the Butte Brewing Company.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HDIAIs_vRA&list=PLHQW9SwT66QvcEaS0CXYALDJFvF0LLQfJ&index=20> Boys from County Cork

To say that the Shea family took their Irish heritage seriously is an understatement. James wanted to enlist in the Irish militia ready to defend, if need be, the burgeoning rebellion against the British and the formation of the Republic of Ireland. Despite the threat of deportation by the U.S, Government, young single Irishmen in Butte were already part of the militia. Married men were excused unless their wives agreed to their service. One of the few who did, Bridget gladly gave her consent.

11:05-11:09 permission for husband to join Irish militia

Sadly, their national pride would lead to what must have been the darkest days of the Shea marriage. In 1917, a short time after moving to their new home, James Shea made a fateful stop at a local establishment. Shaw recounts the incident from a newspaper account.

46:13 - 46:33, 46:44-47:48:29

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRlTEcLThtg> - The Derry Air

Bridget Shea’s domesticity as a wife and mother came to an abrupt end. Not unlike the COVID pandemic, prison contagion was rampant. The death of James Shea during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 left Bridget a widow with four small children and a mortgage.

12:09 - 12:21: widow’s pension

In the house’s enclosed front porch, Shaw has hung a copy of the Shea family portrait taken not long before James Shea’s death.

19:47-20:05 family photo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC6B7sZ03OI&list=PLHQW9SwT66QvcEaS0CXYALDJFvF0LLQfJ&index=23>

Like so many other Butte women at that time, Bridget was forced to join the ranks of waitresses to support her family. No doubt, part of her appeal that lead to her successful leadership in the union, she knew first hand the hardships of widowed mothers.

The Shea home sits on Nanny Goat hill in the Butte business district. The view from the house is nothing short of spectacular. At an altitude of more than 5600 feet, much of the southern aspect of the Summit Valley floor, including two mountain ranges, spreads below.

23:53 - 24:39 - the view from the front porch. (why don’t you describe…)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VgMz0_BYuM>

Wild Irish Rose

Only in Butte could a miners’ cottage be built within 2 blocks of a 34-room residence of Romanesque Revival Victorian architecture. The mansion’s owner, William Clark, at that time was a multimillionaire and one of the wealthiest men in the world.

From there, Bridget set out each working day, dressed in widow’s black, to visit employers in every direction, almost always walking. You can imagine her stopping at the Women’s ProtectiveUnion’s office building a scant three blocks away. Then on to other destinations farther afield.

15:43-15:59 - walking distances

Devoted to her children and the memory of her husband, Bridget never remarried. It is hard to overstate the height of her accomplishments in Butte as an Irish immigrant and a woman at that time.

37:00- 37:12

After her retirement from the union, she continued her devotion to her family and provided a continuing inspiration to them and to Butte’s working women.

59:44-1:00:06 grandchildren

Bridget Shea’s life became an example for WPU officers like Blanche Copenhaver and Val Webster who succeeded her.

1:00:56-1:01:16

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9zUuwh-Hdg> Shall my soul pass thru old Ireland

When she died in 1955, the Rev. James Shea, one of her three sons, celebrated her requiem mass at St. Patrick Church, five blocks from the house. Her name was subsequently chosen for the Butte chapter of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The spirit of Bridget Shea can still be found up on the Butte hill. On the National Historic Register plaque, written in part by Cindy Shaw, Shea’s “home and its “carefully tended garden of shrub roses, lilacs, and lavender are a fragrant and lasting legacy.”

My Wild Irish Rose

Galway Bay