

Copenhaver

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.

This episode highlights the working life of Blanche Copenhaver who was involved in the Women's Protective Union in one role or another for forty years. Her oral history was taken in 1980 by Professor Mary Murphy as part of the Butte Oral History Project organized by the University of Montana.

The interview focuses on Blanche's life as a working waitress who moved up the ranks of the Women's Protective Union to become one of its key officers in the 1950's. A transplant to Butte, her exploitation in non-union work environments elsewhere made her doubly appreciative of what the WPU had accomplished for its membership. Eventually, her leadership and keen understanding of the role of the union in the community guided the organization in an era that saw the stabilization of the work environment for women.

Copenhaver

Born in 1900, Blanche cut her teeth on hard work in the Big Horn Valley in Wyoming farm country. Like many young people, eager to leave the farm and get to town, she left as soon as possible.

1:30 -1:41; 2:14-22

Don't Fence Me In: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtfELFwq0JY>

She worked seven days a week, helping out in the kitchen and waiting tables for \$30 a month. When she was 18, she moved on to the bigger city of Casper to work in a restaurant.

6:19 -6:25

Instrumental from song above

Eventually she joined her older sister to follow the oil boom in Texas. Living in Border near Amarillo, the city grew from 200 to 100,000 in 3 months. Blanche and her sister worked 7 days a week with no overtime in one of the cities two restaurants.

Waltz Across Texas start at :35-1:18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4TEiE07bVE>

Tiring of the dust storms in Texas, the pair moved on to Phoenix where they worked only in the winter. In the sweltering summer, they

Copenhaver

returned to the cool of Wyoming to visit their parents. Her sister remarried and Blanche found herself back in Casper. Securing a waitressing job wasn't difficult, but the working conditions had not improved.

12:26 -12:38;12:50-13:52 (edit Mary's comments)

More Don't Fence Me In

Eventually, as the country began to come out of the depression, Blanche decided to look for greener pastures.

14:20-15:24

Hard Workin' Woman https://archive.org/details/78_hard-workin-woman_b-b-king-king-taub_gbia0059862b/Hard+Workin'+Woman+-+B.+B.+King+-+King+-+Taub.flac

Once she arrived in Butte, Blanche got her first exposure to working in a unionized work environment.

15:47 - 16:38 (edit Mary's comments)

Union Maid?

Finally at the age of 37, Blanche had found a place where women's work was respected. She snagged a waitressing job in Meaderville, an area in Butte where several Italian restaurants were considered among the best in the west.

17:47-18:10

Italian Restaurant music - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7R6YaAVONY>

Relieved of relentless hours of work, Blanche's appreciation for the rights won for workers translated into interest in how the Union was run and how she could become more involved.

18:48-19:30

Tuxedo Junction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBTYcqtaQjg> play throughout the next two segments...

By 1944 Blanche had gotten appointed to the Union's executive board, the first of many positions in the Union's hierarchy.

Copenhaver

24:37-25:17

Copenhaver became a primary decision maker in the Union's activities, overseeing problems between union members and employers, and among union members themselves.

31:00 - 32:42; 33:17-35; 33:40 - 34:09

The Women's Protective Union's strength in organizing resulted in their needing to strike only once in its history. In 1948 the Union's negotiation with the Butte Employer's Association broke down.

34:47-35:11; 35:26-36;35:44-36:42

Play some of our theme music?

As picket captain, Blanche organized the membership to create a presence on the streets. This included a twenty-four picket in front of Butte's largest hotel, the Finlen.

Copenhaver

37:53- 38:00; 38:48 - 38:55.

Picket sound effects - <https://archive.org/details/>

WorkersPicketAntiUnionFreedomFoundationGala

While the effort was serious for everyone, Blanche's personal experience would lead to one of the more memorable events of her life.

39:03 - 59.

Bing Crosby - Blue Skies - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MS-2_8AS_Q)

[v=3MS-2_8AS_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MS-2_8AS_Q)

The strike ended after seven weeks.

41:50-42:16

In the Mood <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRloEtE8clI>

Blanche Copenhaver became president of the Women's Protective Union in 1950 and served in that capacity for twenty years. Membership grew. The Union supported other unions on strike and gave money to striking miners.

Copenhaver

During a miners' strike in the late 50's when there was no unemployment, help came from all over the state when Butte retailers had to lay off workers. The Women's Protective Union made sure no one went hungry.

47:87-49:04

Blanche became involved in the Women's Protective Union's leadership during its heyday in the fifties, but then witnessed its decline after the fight was won. Despite this she became the first female vice-presidents of the Montana AFL-CIO

55:21-56:06

Married for a few years in the early forties and then divorced, Blanche Copenhaver never had children of her own. She readily admitted that instead the Union was a big part of her life. She was as devoted to it as she felt it was to her. Blanche died at the age of 94.

58:33-58:41

