

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.

The oral history collection in the Butte Archives has preserved the personal recollections of these women in vivid detail. They bring to life the challenges and achievements of the boom to bust town.

No immigrant population made a greater contribution to Butte's mining industry than the Cornish. They were the first ethnic group that came to the Mining district in large numbers. Hailing almost exclusively from the tin mines in Cornwall, the very southwest tip of England, these skilled, contract miners brought their talents, and eventually their families, to the 'richest hill on earth.'

In this episode we'll hear from Gwen Mitchell, both sides of whose family were Cornish who had immigrated to work in the mines.

Excerpt 1 (tape 2): 13:44 -47 - – “When we went to high school...”

In an oral history taken in 1987 by Montana historian, Mary Murphy, Gwen Mitchell provides a detailed description of Cornish life in Butte in the early years of the 20th century.

Gwen's parents had immigrated from Cornwall separately. Her maternal grandfather came first. He was disabled in a mine accident in Bingham, Utah, but sent for his wife and children anyway when Gwen's mother, Winifred, was 14.

With money from a settlement offered by the mining company, the family opened a boarding house in Butte. And made pasties.

Excerpt 2 (Tape 1) – 5:05-5:09;

5:17-5:23

Gwen's father, a Cornish miner called John Mitchell, became a boarder at the house at the age of 17.

He met Winifred, who worked there, and in a manner frequent on the Butte hill, love blossomed. Three years later, Winifred and John were married.

While working as a shift supervisor at the Leonard and the Tramway mines, John, along with Winifred, built a house in the McQueen neighborhood. They raised three daughters including Gwen who was born in 1906. Gwen lived at the house, and worked on the east side of Butte most of her life, but went to town regularly.

Excerpt 3 (tape 1):14:01 – 14:17 (edit Mary)

The nearby Columbia Gardens, Montana's only amusement park, was a fond early

memory.

Excerpt 4 –(tape 1): 15:20-15:45; 16:51 – 17:17 (edit out the Mary’s comments)

Partially paralyzed by polio, Gwen’s family made sure she was educated so she could be independent. After graduating from high school, she studied to become a teacher, and taught at the Franklin School in McQueen. Many of her students were from immigrant families from Italy, Austria, and what was then called Yugoslavia.

Excerpt 5 - tape #1: 30:22-31:10

Gwen was devoted to her career as a teacher. In those days that meant she was required to remain single, and so she lived in her childhood home in McQueen until she was 61.

Excerpt 6 - tape # 1: 33:00-33:10 ; 33:30-33:42.

When the Franklin School had to make way for the Berkley Pit, she transferred over to East Jr. High where she finished a teaching career spanning forty-five years.

While Gwen embraced the role of teacher as the moral compass of a community, those years were not without their good times.

Excerpt 7 (Tape 1): 38:10-29; 38:40-55; 40:09-28 (edit out interviewer’s comments.

The Cornish were strongly religious and traditionally Methodist, building most of the

Methodist churches in Butte. Gwen's memories of Cornish traditions reflect the depth of her involvement.

The Cornish continued their custom of a Harvest Festival to raise money for the care of the church. Despite Butte's lack of farm produce, the feast was memorable.

Excerpt 8 –(Tape 1): 42:13 -43:10 (edit out interviewer's comments)

Gwen eventually became a member of Butte's Shakespeare Club, one of its numerous women's groups founded early on to provide an outlet, particularly for women with literary interests.

Excerpt 9(Tape 1) 53:47 – 54:30

In her retirement Gwen devoted many hours to the Methodist Church, including the United Methodist Women and the local unity circle. At age 82, she was still busy helping to plan the Church's Harvest Festival and make pasties.

She also became a charter member of the Montana Cornish Cousins. With a lifelong love for family, gardening and travel, she lived to be 97.

Excerpt 10(Tape 2): 21:00-06 – “You have to set the example.”

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Gwen Mitchell

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