

Welcome to Mining City Reflections, illuminating 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 recollections of women who bring to life the challenges and achievements of the boom to bust town. In this episode, we hear the story of Lula Martinez, a Mexican immigrant who arrived with her family in Butte in 1925 at age 3.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1 : 14:40-14:47]

That's Lula's voice from the oral history she made in 1987 with Laurie Mercier for the Montana Historical Society Project, Women as Community Builders.

Adding to a host of other immigrant groups, Hispanics came to Butte as early as the 1880s with majority arriving in the 1920's and 30's. Experienced in mining in Mexico, they made excellent copper miners, and were often assigned to work in the hottest mines, such as the Belmont.

Lula and her eleven siblings grew up on East Galena Street where the sounds of the mines, which operated night and day, were among her earliest memories.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1 : 4:25-4:41]

Non- English speaking immigrants gravitated to the east side of town where dozens of languages were heard, but the miners and their families

managed to find ways to communicate.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 5:13-5:33]

Although Butte was a melting pot of ethnic diversities, racial and class hierarchy made life difficult, particularly for children at school where their early experiences, sadly, would leave lasting impressions.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 7:18-8:30]

Lula's home life became even more complicated when their mother, twice married to Mexican miners, was widowed both times. Because Petra Ortega spoke no English, her children had to assume the responsibility of communicating with the larger, often unforgiving, society.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 9:37-10:10] "An eleven year old girl...

Despite their poverty, Petra Ortega, with her emphasis on *la familia*, drew on survival skills that inspired her children for a lifetime. With generosity, and a richness of spirit that precluded judgment and defied their circumstances, she taught Lula how to respond in ways that could elevate people's attitudes.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 15:05-16:00]"She never gave up.

A second influence came in an unlikely fashion when a dedicated teacher took the time to teach English to an immigrant girl. Looking back, Lula describes the complex psychological responses of her own mind that illustrates the confusion immigrant children face.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 16:08 – 17:53]

Butte's Hispanic community numbered more than 2000 at its height. While no barrio existed in the city, Mexican American families gathered together at holidays and other family events and celebrations to honor their culture, cuisine and music, and to preserve the Spanish language.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 2: 28:15-29:32] –edit interviewer at 29:22

Once Lula Martinez left Butte she raised a family, while working with migrant farm laborers, and became an activist in whatever community where she found herself. Often she spoke truths that others didn't necessarily like to hear.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 43:15 -44:26]

While her work often centered on confronting injustices, she valued the opportunities she had, and spoke eloquently about the mindful nature of work on the land.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1: 50:33-52:22]

After years organizing migrant farmers throughout the Pacific Northwest, Lula returned to Butte from 1984 to 1988 to work with the Butte Community Union, a non-profit which assisted low income families after the Anaconda Company closed the mine. Eventually she returned to Portland, Oregon to be closer to family, and died there the next year. She left a legacy of courage, and dedication to helping the less fortunate.

Excerpt [Martinez Tape 1:45:36-42 “we’re all one big family come from the tree of life...]

11 excerpts - 9:50 min

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