

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 reminiscences of these women in vivid detail. They bring to life the challenges and achievements of the boom to bust town.

During the first half of the last century, the streets of Butte teemed with more than 20 ethnic groups, seeking a new life. The melting pot image of America was nowhere more evident than in the Mining City.

In this segment we explore the experience of Butte resident, Mary Trbovich, the daughter of Serbian immigrants. Her recollections are documented in an oral history interview recorded by Professor Mary Murphy in 1987, and give a detailed glimpse of one of Butte's prominent ethnic communities.

[1-Excerpt tape#1 – 2:45-3:03]

Serbians began arriving in large numbers in America in the late 19th century, with more than 2,000 Serbs living in Butte by 1910. Part of this wave, Mary's parents, Stana and Louie Markovich, had immigrated from Budva, Yugoslavia near Dubovnick on the Adriatic coast. [Serbian folk music...Zlatni Vals](#)

Mary's father had been a stonecutter but soon adapted to mining in the United States, first in Bisbee, Arizona. Then in 1918, when she was four, the Markovichs and their three children moved to Butte where Louie Markovich had a cousin. Mary's father worked in the mine 16 hours a day.

[2 -Excerpt –tape #1 - 6:47-7:42; 7:48-8:20]

Despite the difficult working conditions, the Trbovich family adapted. Mary spoke Serbian at home, learned English at school, and like a lot of immigrant children, taught the new language to her parents. The Serbian community, deeply religious but far from the old country, were keen to have their children retain their Serbian heritage. The children, not so much. [Serbian Orthodox Chanting/Divna Ljubojevic](#)

[3 -Excerpt – tape#1 – 8:54 – 9:21; tape#2 – 13:28-43]

Serbian customs followed the Julian calendar of the Orthodox Church which celebrates holidays a week or so later, a difference that clearly set the community apart. This often created embarrassment for their school children who found that an extra Christmas brought unwanted attention.

[4-Excerpt – tape #1- 50:54 – 52:22]

During her teenage years, Mary worked with her mother, who like many of the women in her community, provided room and board for the many single, Serbian miners. Eating traditional Serbian food, like sarma and povitica, no doubt provided comfort for those far from home.

[5-Excerpt-tape #1- 58:07- 58:39; 58:44-59:04]

After graduation from Butte High School during the Great Depression, Mary landed a coveted job at Montana Power, where she earned sixty dollars a month. With her father out of work, she gave her mother her paycheck, the sole income on which the family relied.

In 1935 she married Eli Trbovich from Anaconda which also had a large Serbian population. In the strictest Orthodox tradition of the time, usually only the male congregants were allowed to attend a wedding ceremony. Luckily, Mary's in-laws were more liberal, and her mother and female members of the family were able to attend the ceremony. [Hajide Jano](#)

[6-Excerpt – Tape #1 - 35:29-36:45]

Marriage meant Mary had to leave her job. Montana Power Co. like numerous corporations, and the School Board, would not employ married women. Only after she separated from her husband in 1941 could she return to her position.

[7 -Excerpt – Tape #1 - 22:12 – 22:46]

As an adult, Mary took an active role in her community, and became a founding member of the Serbian Circle of Sisters at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, where they continued the tradition of taking the minutes in Serbian. She eventually visited Yugoslavia -- though her mother, like many immigrant women, never saw her homeland or parents again.

[8-Excerpt – tape#2 - 12:00 – 12:24]

By then, the value of her parents' devotion to their culture became evident. Mary came to appreciate the courage, sacrifice and hard work her parents put forth to make a life for their family in a new country.

[9-Excerpt – tape # 2 – 16:05-16:22]

Mary died in 1992 at the age of 79. Her well-attended funeral was held at Holy Trinity where many of the traditions of the Serbian culture continue even today, a testament to the steadfastness of Butte's multicultural roots.

Taped excerpts – 7:18 min

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