

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 today's episode we continue to explore the history of the Women's Protective Union, a landmark in American labor history, and a powerful influence in the lives of working women in Butte for eight decades. We'll hear from one of the Union's long time members, Mildred Laitinen, whose oral history was taken in December, 1995 by Whitney Williams, director of the Butte Archives' Labor History project.

Millie worked in restaurants and banquet halls in the Mining City as a member of the Women's Protective Union, and its successor, the Hotel and Restaurant Union, for 50 years. Her story exemplifies the experience of many of the Union's members during the heyday of the organization in the mid-20th century boom. Her descriptions of small and ordinary moments build a clear picture of how the Union strengthened a woman's place in the work force.

1:24-1:33 - couldn't get a job unless you were in the union..

Born in Minnesota to Finnish immigrants in 1922, Millie moved to Butte at age 13 to join her mother, herself a Union member and already working in one of the city's largest boarding houses.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZaij1pdAL0> start at

(Union Maid music) ukelele instrumental

For many young women entering the work force out of high school in the Depression, a dependable job was vital and most likely found in one of Butte's many food establishments. Millie washed dishes, and then worked as a maid in the Leonard Hotel. Eventually, she made her way into the waitressing world. She went to work at the Moxsom Cafe where she learned the finer points of waitressing from a legend.

3:18 -3:48 Toots 36:39-58

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za34xhluhj0>

"Okay, Toots" Start at 2:40

Butte's mining economy between the world wars resembled a roller coaster with four miners' strikes between 1914 and 1934. The Women's

Protective Union was the only safety net for a widowed mother and daughter.

9:08-19; 9:27-33

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ES41SDelb3s>

"Brother can you spare a dime?" (start at :30 - 58) just use the instrumental intro)

The Union created a visible presence in the city. An officer called a business agent could be seen striding along the uptown streets to make regular visits to employers and union members alike.

6:15 - 6:30 Bridget Shea; 7:05-7:15

Rosie the Riveter - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v7S9moVQEU&list=PLA86C2DA5F0C1DB7E&index=29>

At the start of World War II, Millie married Toyven Laitinen and spent the war years in California. They returned to Butte and its bustling Finnish community soon after, and had two sons. Once her boys were school age Millie returned to employment outside the home and spent much of her work life as 'a banquet girl,' a position peculiar to the city's vibrant banquet circuit.

Westminster Waltz - start at :11

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kZgHCi2gsY&list=PLoshmbf_dCUjCj9aT_yDBI5ABh2jU7Wsy&index=16

Butte's numerous hotels and fraternal groups like the Elks and Pioneers hosted a regular schedule of banquets for organizations like the Anaconda Mining Company and the Montana Power Company. Celebrating holidays, holding business or political meetings, these gatherings were often fancy affairs. The events boasted precision meal service fashioned after the elegant dining rooms of Chicago and New York with fine china, crystal and silverware.

More Westminster Waliz

11:36 - 12:28

Millie enjoyed the camaraderie of the banquet halls for nearly thirty years working uptown, and then switching to the lunch and banquet service at the Butte Country Club.

15:55 - 16:03

High Heels

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTn4Z2LLu3U&list=PLoshmbf_dCUjCj9aT_yDBI5ABh2jU7Wsy&index=17

The demand for banquet service was high and there was no shortage of opportunity.

16:25 -17:26

More High Heels

The Hotel Finlen appointed a head waitress who dictated the pecking order for the workers.

37:10-34

More High Heels

Millie had grown up in the union, with her mother extolling its benefits. The WPU sought to empower it membership by fostering participation. Attendance at meetings was essential. They were scheduled twice monthly, one during the day; and one at night to accommodate restaurant shift work.

19:05 19:15

Solidarity also required a certain degree of discipline and close oversight. Officers kept tabs on meeting attendance and voting.

6:44-56 buttons

19:30-40 - voting

Instrumental of The Internationale

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cOEBOHA5TM>

The meetings were well attended, often with hundreds of members, and served as a social outlet as well.

20:32 - stop and have a cup of coffee

More Internationale

While the Women's Protective Union invoked a strike once in its storied history, the membership also honored the strikes in other unions as well. Picketing was part of a member's responsibility.

21:49 - 22:27 -picketing

More international

During her long work history, Millie saw the evolution of the union's leadership, and respected their commitment and dedication. Keep in mind these were working class women with no access to higher education or mentoring by more experienced male union members.

29:39 - 29:54; 30:00-30:13; 30:22-31

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djTK6zGsi2E>

Piano instrumental

In the mid-1970's, once the Women's Protective Union merged with a male union, its hard-fought benefits seemed to be taken for granted. At the same time, unions all across the country began to weaken. But Millie remembered and appreciated the early successes.

32:11-32.49 - if you have a problem...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnbCRdGeuyE&t=29s>

Bread and Roses instrumental

Millie and her husband, a mail-carrier, lived into their 80's and enjoyed a well-earned retirement with grandchildren and travel. She came from a generation who worked hard and felt no job was too small. And they took pride in their work no matter what the pay.

39:07- he brought home the bacon and I brought home the bread

