

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.

In this episode of Mining City Reflections we draw on an oral history of Norma Pilling Gronfein who came to Butte in 1947. Montana historian Mary Murphy interviewed Norma in 1987.

In 1885, nearly a quarter of Butte's stores were selling food, clothing, jewelry, hats, cigars, and hardware, to the bustling mining community. Most were Jewish-owned.

By the early 20th century, Jewish mercantile interests grew to include several large furniture and department stores. Members of the Jewish Community became prominent civic leaders including Henry Jacobs, the first mayor of Butte. The Gronfein family owned the Stratford Men's Shop in the heart of Butte on North Main Street. Their son Stan had gone to work in Seattle after graduating in industrial relations from Stanford.

Once World War II was over, he returned to run the family business. With him he brought his wife, Norma, who early on was attracted by the city's entertainment. Excerpt Tape#1: 3:17- 3:33

A graduate of the University of Washington in Far Eastern Studies, Norma was an educated woman who sought ways to feed her intellectual interest while still fulfilling her role as a homemaker. She raised three children while finding time to use her organizational skills in voluntary activity and charitable efforts in many of Butte's women's groups.

Though she was new to town, she found Butte an affable place. Excerpt Tape # 1- 33:00 – 33:37

During the 1960's Butte's mining industry had begun its inevitable decline. The city's several Jewish Congregations had begun to decrease in size as well, and

decided to merge. To assist her congregation, Norma Gronfein took on the volunteer role as secretary of the B’Nai Israel Temple. She served in that capacity for 19 years.

Excerpt Tape #1 – 8:04-8:40

A challenging and emotional time, Norma helped to guide the membership so that in 1969 the Jewish community united under the B’nai Israel Temple. The oldest operating synagogue in Montana remains a symbol across the state.

Excerpt Tape # 1 - 12:48-13:26;
14:48-15:15

Norma Gronfein represented a new generation of women in Butte whose husbands did not work at the mine, but who formed a small, vital middle class in the city. Many of the friends she made were also transplants who developed strong connections through social gatherings that were popular at the time – namely bridges clubs.

Excerpt Tape # 2 -18:35-19:04; 19:35-19:57.

By the time her youngest child was in elementary school, she decided to put voluntary work aside and became a substitute teacher.

Excerpt Tape # 1 – 5:24-6:01

Like many teachers of that era, Norma joined AAUW, The American Association of University Women. They were instrumental in lobbying the state legislature for public kindergartens as well as promoting local improvements.

Excerpt Tape #1 -36:18 -40; 37:44-38:11.

The AAUW also lobbied the Montana legislature to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972. The seventies were a period of rapid change for American women and Norma identified as a feminist though she saw herself as a minority in Butte.

Excerpt tape #2 - 21:26-21:50;

In retirement she returned to her volunteer work and was also active on the city’s Art Chateau Board, and the Library Board. She also became a member of Homer Club, the longest continuously meeting Women’s club in Montana. Originally

begun by the wives of mine owners, hoping to elevate the vision of local social activities for women, the group had a reputation for elegance.

Excerpt Tape # 2 – 12:32 – 12:59

Garden clubs were also prevalent across the city in the mid- 20th century with plantings of baby's breath and petunias a regular occurrence. Norma's garden club, Hill and Dale, had been around for 40 years.

Excerpt tape #2 – 34:11 – 34:22; 34:30 -35.

Norma's recollections provide an insider's view of women's organizations in Butte. Her story reflects the choices made by middle class women navigating the transition from stay at home moms to working outside the home.

Norma Gronfein passed away at the age of 86. In the Homer Club's 100 year old memory book, she is remembered as follows:

“Described by fellow members as a caring, loyal, true friend, Norma was widely read though modest about her accomplishments. Her contributions to our community were as varied as her interests.”

Mining City Reflections is a production of KBMF-LP and has been funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Permission for these recordings has been granted by the Butte Silver Bow Archives, the Montana Historical Society and the University of Montana. Hear this program again at ButteAmericaRadio.org

Total Excerpt length – 6 min. 5 sec