

Perdita Duncan Script

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

During the first half of the last century, more than twenty ethnic groups arrived in Butte. The city's history truly mirrors the melting pot image of America. But that reflection is not without tarnish.

In this segment we explore the experience of African Americans through an oral history, recorded in 1980 by Montana historian, Professor Mary Murphy. She interviewed Perdita Duncan, an articulate and self-assured voice for those who endured discrimination --- not for their ethnicity or national origin but for the color of their skin.

[1 – Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 37:01-08]

Perdita was born in Butte in 1927, the second of four children in the Duncan family. They were among the Mining City's small black population that hovered around two thousand, a scant two per cent of the total.

While Jim Crow laws did not exist in Montana, African-Americans were not fully accepted in Butte. Though employment was available, for women this meant work as domestics or waitresses and cooks. The jobs for men usually existed in the service sector as well, like railroad porters and valets, while the better paying jobs in the mines were off limits.

In contrast, Perdita's father, John had studied podiatry, and her mother, Armeta, had trained as an elementary school teacher. They proved inspirational role models, instilling a strong sense of achievement and

identity in their children, all of whom went to college.

Despite her training, Perdita's mother had to take work as a domestic, but her refinement must have been noticed because she was held in high esteem by her employer, Cornelius Kelly, the Anaconda Mining Company's longest serving president, and one of the most powerful men in the state.

[2-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 7:41-9:02]

Perdita's father possessed a cosmopolitan perspective, having been born in India and then educated in America. She still could recall his concerns for the state of the world while watching the Armistice Day celebration in Butte in 1917.

[3- Excerpt Duncan tape #1 - 13:09-13:33]

Though the Duncan household provided stability and a loving environment, life outside the home presented challenges. Perdita recalls her school days in Butte where discrimination was more subtle than other parts of the country --- but nonetheless present.

[4-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 17:36-59]**The Old Rugged Cross**

While the black churches served as a center for social as well as religious life, they no doubt inspired Perdita's love of music. She demonstrated talent at the piano at an early age, and her parents found Butte offered rigorous music training in the classics including opera.

[5-Excerpt- Duncan tape #2 -25:53-27:06] **Caruso – Che Gelida Manina**

Once Perdita entered high school her social life suffered, but her music sustained her along with a kind-hearted principal who encouraged her. Her strength of character emerged.

[6-Excerpt Duncan tape #1 – 34:42-35:35]-[36:58-38:38]

Even with these difficulties, Perdita pursued her lifelong passion for music and dancing at every turn. Imagine her amazement when a dance marathon showed up at the Knights of Columbus in Butte. **Dance Marathon music**

[7-Excerpt-Duncan tape #2 – 43:33 – 44:05]

Despite the isolation and discrimination, Perdita embraced the opportunities before her. She considered her Butte High School education superior and felt ready to face the world after graduating.

[8-Excerpt – Duncan tape #2- 31:15-32:56]

Eventually Perdita traveled to Ohio to attend Oberlin, the first white college to admit African-American women. But there was little opportunity to pursue a vocation in concert music. **Erik Satie**

[9-Excerpt - Duncan tape #1 - 42:11-42:45]

Unsure what profession to pursue, Duncan majored in sociology and English, and moved to New York City after graduation. Eventually she began a career in social work that would last 37 years. Encouraged to enroll in law courses at St. John's University, she held a position in the legal division of New York City's Department of Social Services. But she did not abandon her love of music. Instead Perdita developed a second career as a classical music critic.

[10-Excerpt – Duncan Tape #1 – 45:09 – 46:28]

She spent her nights at Carnegie Hall and The Metropolitan Opera, eventually reviewing performances in a column for the New York Amsterdam News, one of the largest black newspapers in the country. Her reviews even appeared in the New York Times. **Franz Liszt “Liebestraum”**

Once retired, she returned to Butte to care for her aging mother, continuing to write music reviews into her 70's, this time for the Montana Standard. About growing up in Butte, Perdita said, “I learned very early that I was a colored girl growing up in a white community and that my name was Perdita Duncan. After that, nobody could crush me.” Perdita died at home in Butte

in 1985 at the age of 76.

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Taped Excerpts – 9 minutes