

**This is an interview of Bob Koprivica, a long time Butte businessman, and Butte icon. Donielle Biers conducted the interview at Bob and Joe's Wholesale on March 7, 2002 at 2:15 p.m. This is an oral assignment for Butte history. Instructor James Harrington.**

**Thank you so much for taking this time to let me interview you for my Butte history class. You have given so much to our community.**

**Can you tell me what it was like growing up in Butte Montana?**

After being throughout the world and other nations, and dealing with small people throughout the world and the biggest people in the world, I found that the greatest blessing that I could have had was being born and raised in Butte Montana. Butte is like a beautiful garden, just like our country, the United States of America. We don't realize what a treasure we have. God must have loved us so dearly and I'm not throwing religion in this or anything but what's good in this country we have everything we want just like a beautiful garden. And if we take care of that garden, if we weed it, and water it, and take care of it from here (Bob placed his hand over his heart.) and not our wallets this beautiful nation will take care of the whole world. This nation was destined to be the leader of the future for peace throughout the world. We have fumbled the ball so badly. This is why we're having these problems now. People aren't aware of what's going on. I have been involved in the peace mission for over 20 years. I've been threatened. I have dealt with the key people in the world and do you know that no matter where I've been in the world all people are the same. All they want is peace in their lives and a chance to earn a living for the life of their family and to educate their children and lead a normal life at all costs. Do to the fact that other things, greed and what I call these ruthless idiots, they feel they are going to dominate people and suppress them in order to rule, and a good ruler doesn't suppress people he brings his people together and work together to develop their country. Every country on this planet can be a reliable economic country, and a strong country through its education and so forth but again you must be strong economically before you can do what's right and the only way you can be strong economically is to be democratic in your thinking. A lot of people who develop themselves suppress people. When you suppress people all you have is a history of ignorance. But you have to allow people to express their God given talent and utilize life in order to bring in good ideas and have a nation develop and so forth. The important thing in all nations is not to split them up. It tells you in the Bible: a home or a nation divided within itself cannot stand. We're seeing this in the United States right now. I'm not a philosopher; I'm just a little bare footed kid who came from the east side of Butte. But God has put me in this position I couldn't believe. I see it so clearly now, and maybe I'm too old. I'm 83 years old now, and life is beautiful isn't it? Human beings are beautiful. They're all so precious.

I see these little children in the park, the low-income kids. I can't believe how beautiful they are. They're all my friends.

This is one of the toughest neighborhoods in town. When I built this park here, I took it over; they were going to sell it to a low-income housing, sub-division group. This was a half way park. How sad. So I went to the railroad and I said would you please sell it to me. I want to make a park. There's low-income kids throughout this area from the Silver Bow Homes. Where kids could come here to play. So they sold it to me and look what transpired. I could tell you stories about the park that could make you cry but the youngsters are learning in the right way, if you know what I mean, just by giving them a little bit of attention and a little bit of love, that's what makes the world turn. If you want to destroy a nation, destroy the upcoming crop. And that's our children, the future of our world. Can you see the flag out there? Oh you can't see it. **(It is snowing very heavy outside)**. Right there, there is a kind of platform kind of a podium for people to give speeches, to have musical lyrics in our park. Right there, there is a large stone. Have you ever read what was on that stone? Have you young lady? **(No, I haven't.)** Ok, and I didn't name this park. The Board of Country Commissioners changed the name to Koprivica Park after I bought it and they saw what I was doing with it. Would you like to see the letter they sent me so it will be verified or do you believe me. Would you like to see it? **(No, but I would like a copy to put with this interview.)**

**I have a question here about the park being named after you and how it made you feel.**

It made me feel very humble but I didn't want them to name it the Koprivica Park. I'm a business man who believes that two and two is four and I believe in approaching things with love and understanding and I do not believe in approaching things with frightening people and threatening people and bigotry and so forth.

You know what it says on the stone? **(No, what does it say)** Welcome to Koprivica Park. This park is dedicated to our youth who are destined to be the leaders of the future, in our nation and throughout the world. If we adults will provide a drug free and violent free environment, in which our children can grow old and mature, they will blossom and be capable to lead the world to peace and a better way of life for all people. Enjoy the park and please remember, the key to success and all good things in life is love, and "GOD is Love." Signed, the Koprivica Family. **(Did you write that?)** I wrote that **(That's beautiful)** and I'm not that smart. God told me what to write. I mean it. I've been in positions in my life dealing with the key people in the Soviet Union and the Yugoslavia crisis and in peace in our country in Washington D.C. and didn't have a prepared thing ever in my hand, and when I would stand up and when it was my turn to talk things would come riveting from above. It tells me in the bible, and I'm not a minister but I do read the bible. It says in the bible: do not worry when it comes your time to speak. The Holy Spirit will guide you at that very hour, and that's happened to me so often. Words come out of me and ideas and I can go back to wherever I was throughout the world as a friend and person respected and loved. I mean it and I'm just a simple little kid from Butte Montana.

## **What was it like when you were growing up?**

When I was growing up we lived on the east side. It was during the depression. I went to work selling papers. My dad had a grocery store and a meat market and this was before the big depression, we had a depression but the mines were closing and opening and the people that made money in these mines would take the money and flee. This town was a tough town to live in. My dad had a grocery store and a meat market, and he was very generous man and when the depression hit, the first one, he kept all of his customers going and he finally couldn't keep going any more he had to close his store and he owed over \$8000.00 in bills. A lot of those people paid him back but a lot didn't, they couldn't. I will never forget one widow by the name of McCloud. She had I don't know how many kids. She owed us a bill of \$75.00 or \$150.00, which at that time that was a lot of money. Would you believe over the years at \$5.00 a time she insisted on paying that bill? And she paid that bill off at \$5.00 a time. I will never forget. I know the boys are good friends of mine. Wasn't that remarkable. When my dad had to close the store and we children my two sisters. I had three sisters and two brothers. The two older sisters went to work selling papers and the two brothers got paper routes and I helped sell. I had the corner in front of Finlen Hotel. I was about 7 years old when I started selling papers there. We had to fight everyday to keep our corner, it was a good corner. And I was very fortunate. And with all of us working together, all of our family like that, a penny at a time, my mother she was not worried. She always said if you take care of the pennies, the dollars will take care of you. She was always asking God to bless our lives, she was very devout Catholic. A wonderful lady and she brought us up in my dad's faith, Eastern Serbian Orthodox Church. Which is a catholic church but we don't have ties with the Pope. Anyway, everything worked out and eventually she saved enough money with us children working to buy a house on East Park Street. We bought a house, 3-bedroom house, a beautiful brick house for \$2500.00. Can you imagine that? You could buy a new car for; you could buy a new Ford Car for \$395, a big Buick with all the luxuries in it for less than \$1,000.00. A dollar was a big thing. It really was.

All right? We use to cross these tracks. Cuz we lived on the East side to come down here and play. This was a dirt field, and umh, they unloading the watermelon cars. This was a great area for produce warehouses and distribution centers and everything. This was a great town at one time. These gentlemen were unloading the watermelon cars for the wholesale produce man would see us kids out there and were straggly little kids. And they would break a watermelon and give it to us and we'd come here and play and walk back home. Little did I ever realize that God would bless me with the opportunity to own this entire block and to own that park and it isn't my park. It's God's. Were just here to preserve it.

I went to work when I was 16. The big depression hit. Nobody was working in the family. So I went to work in a grocery store in East Park Street. I had a half-year to go in High School and I got a job for \$15.00 a week, 6 days a week and worked hunter's hours. You worked until you were through. No vacation and I stayed there for 6 years. I use to take .50 cents out of my \$15.00 and give it to my mother. I worked my way up to. \$27.00 after 6 years and never had a vacation, never a day off, nothing. Things were

different. Some people who made money in the world were very, very tight with it. I always thought that if I ever got in the business, I would now how to treat people. Eventually through the grace of God I took over a bankrupt business when I was in my 30's. I was a salesman for this company. And the partnership, I had 3 partners, 3 of my best friends. We bought this business out up on the corner. It was called Sweet Brothers. And I was the youngest one. And after 3 years we lost every penny we had. We were up at Poore's, Bob Poore and Jim Poore, they were young attorneys then, I was just a young kid. I was just 33 years old, and we went into the meeting. All our creditors were there. There were some from Washington, some from the breweries. And Poore and Poore were the representative for our creditors. And the bankers were there from the First National Bank, the Metals Bank, and Newland and Bluin were the accountants. And Jim Poore stood up, gentlemen we reviewed this before your partners came up and we decided the only way out for you people was to file bankruptcy. And my partners they were just going to file bankruptcy. And I was just a young kid. Full of guts and energy and I said I can't file bankruptcy. Jim Poore said, Mr. Koprivica. He's trying to be Mr. Bigshot, he had his hands in his suspenders and there I was flat broke. If it would cost \$5.00 to get to Anaconda, I couldn't get out of sight. Well, he said why can't you file bankruptcy. Well, I have a mom and dad down at the end of Montana Street in that there cemetery that would turn over in their graves if I didn't try to pay these people. They trusted us, they're friends. They are good people. They aren't trying to hurt us and they've got their money coming and I would like to have the opportunity to try and pay them back. And they said "What a noble speech." Where is all this money going to come from? We owed over \$50,000.00 in bills. Where' all this money going to come from to pay these people. And I spoke just like I felt. I said I don't know where in the hell the money is going to come from. All I have left to fight with is the good name of Koprivica and my knowledge of the beer business. I will discontinue the produce department and the can goods department. I will go strictly with beer. I believe if they give me enough elbowroom, in due time, I will pay them all back. And he snickered. I will never forget this man, a produce man we owed him about \$8000.00, and his name was Jim Brown, from Browns and Olds in Spokane. He said now wait a minute. Lets go into the other room and leave them sit with his customers. And when they come out, this Jim Brown from Spokane said, Bob they, the gentlemen, they've asked me to talk for the group. And he said I admire your courage. And we feel that if you file bankruptcy we wouldn't get much anyway so were going to stand back and give you the opportunity to see if your going to do what you said you would do. And I thanked him.

Later on this man told me, Bob at that meeting they said if you stayed in business 6 months it would be a miracle. They didn't know we didn't have a penny; we didn't have a penny to buy anything. Flat broke. \$50,000.00 in bills. I asked God to be my partner, and I took on one of that partners that was sick and had diabetes. He was there, that's it. And miracles worked in my life. Things began to click. You cannot believe all the connections I made. For example, I'll tell you. I was working out at the YMCA, I was getting tired and weak from all this stress. When I was young, I didn't know what emotional stress was, or burnout, or anything like that. So I started feeling a little tired and started going to the Y and work out, probably to get my mind off things and I lay awake at night and worry about all this stuff. And I met a man by the name of Barrett Kane. He was the headman at Safeway's and his son. We got along real well together.

And he came to Butte here to manage Safeway stores, all the stores. And he worked at that new warehouse out there, Safeway Warehouse at the time. He's the man that helped build this town. He and I became friends. One day I was in the warehouse, sitting there in my chair thinking my God where do we go from here. The money wasn't coming in like it should be. We were holding our own virtually. Things were tight. Barrett Kane walks in. He said Bob; we've decided to bring in our own private labels for Safeway stores. I had nothing to do with this. It's something that just happened. He said and we have Brown Derby Beer and Best Beer. And he said I know the position your in and I'd like you to be the State wholesaler for our beers. And I said Barrett, God Bless you, thank you. I said Barrett there's only one problem with a big account like yours. I don't have the cash to pay you for the beer and bring it in. He said I thought about that. You know what I'll do, when we order a car load of beer to come in here, it'll come through your warehouse to our warehouse so you won't have to deliver by order to our Safeway Stores and we'll deliver it though out the State. Can you imagine this? He said. When you order the car of beer, you come up and we will pay you in advance. That came out to be about \$12,000.00 to \$15,000.00 in cold cash, to work with. And I said God bless you, I gave him a price that was very fair. And he asked me to call the owner of the breweries. They were two Jewish boys. One was Jerry Haserlick and one was his brother. And they ran one of the old, Olds breweries. And I had to explain to Jerry Hasrlick, Jerry; I'm just going to start my business. He said yes I know Barrett Kane talked to me about you. And I said this is a big account. I don't have the cash to pay you cash for your beer. Could you extend me some credit so I can handle this account properly? He said Bob I'll tell you what, if you order a car of beer. And when you sell that car of beer and order another the next one you pay for the first one. This gave me another \$10,000.00 to work with. Can you imagine this? Just out of the blue sky. Oh my God, I couldn't believe it. So that made us healthy and we could buy things. I couldn't even get beer from the breweries, I would have to borrow beer from my friends in Great Falls and Missoula then come and resell it. Oh I worked like a dog. But anyway, that worked out and our business started to profit. Then Safeway's came to me one day and said Bob seeing how you discontinued your produce, you have produce coolers in the building, and we have some cabbage could you store the cabbage in your buildings. I'll store anything you want for you, I said. Are you pressed for warehouse space? He said we are destitute for warehouse space. I said why don't I try to get Barrett Kane to take over this building. I think he'll take it over. The building was too big for our business. And we were paying \$400.00 a month, which is a lot of money at that time. So I called Barrett Kane and I told him what we had and I said Barrett, would you be interested in taking our lease over because I found a little building up there next to Perry's called Produce that would suit our business very beautifully for \$75.00 a month. When they took over our lease and we moved over there, and then things started to blossom. Couldn't believe it. When we created our business it created \$100's of \$1000's of dollars.

Then Lucky Lager beer came in and they came to us. And we had to build a new warehouse. I went to the Metals bank and in 3 years I paid all these debts off. Three years, can you imagine that? My God, paid all the debts off. I didn't have any cash. I was still developing. Built a new warehouse there at 813 S. Arizona Street. I went to the

bank and I built a new warehouse for \$50,000.00. Sonny Allen was the contractor. We could handle anything then. Lucky Lager Brewery and Miller Brewery came to us. And we just blossomed. We became one of the number one beer distributors in the State of Montana. We sold our business for millions of dollars, and then we had a business in Spokane and sold it for millions. We have business in Walla, Walla, Washington now. God was so good to us. You can't believe how things worked out in my life. And it wasn't me, I'm no genius. I'm just a little kid from Butte and God took care and it worked out, if we could teach this to our youngsters, if we could just teach, if we could teach this to our leaders. I believe in people earning their way and I believe in utilizing all the brains in this community to develop it. The trouble with our community is that our community is so divided. And we don't utilize. We have allowed people to corner the market in this town.

I was 83 years old the other day. I'm involved in trying to promote business in the Soviet Union. I've been involved in the Yugoslavia crisis. I've been involved in making peace throughout the world. And I'm running out of gas. I'm getting tired, I admit it. But God has been good to me and the greatest blessing he ever bestowed on me and my family and my mom and dad is to have us live in the United States of America and to live in Butte Montana.

They're ripping this town to shreds. This town should have been the largest town between Seattle and Chicago. The streets of this town could be paved with gold for the wealth that has been taken out here and the funds that have been poured through here. But everyone ran with that money. Very few of them put a penny back. See how much they have put out of their own personal finances back into the community. They have been in the political cloth. Not one of them has been a businessman. You tell me one good thing they've done. Correct me if I'm wrong please. I might learn something. And I'm not degrading anybody, I don't hate anybody. Our youth are so neglected. At this day and age our youth, the most beautiful youth ever but you've got to give them an opportunity they are surrounded with an environment that is the most horrible environment in the history of this world. Gangs, drugs, pornography. What have we done for them? When I bought this park and built it up, I asked if they would come down here and set up some programs for the low-income kids. Every kid isn't a football player or a basketball player or a baseball player. Lot of these kids has special talents like good marble shooters; all kids have talents. They develop these talents and they become better and stronger people. So they promised me to develop these programs. I asked them to and I would pay for them, the prices and the costs. I haven't seen them in over 4 years.

**I remember my grandfather talking about the cabbage patch. I have read that you have traced your ancestry back to 12<sup>th</sup> century Serb and Croatian roots. Were there different ethnic neighborhoods and how do you think they shaped Butte?**

There were different ethnic neighborhoods all throughout Butte. There was Fin Town, there was the Irish were up in Cork Town, the Italians were down in Meaderville, and the Croatians were down on the east side, the Serbs were spread throughout most of the community. But they all were pretty close. They came to this country and they couldn't even speak the language. So the way they came here, one would work and make enough money and would send and get another one. And that's the way they brought people over here and they would live in the same areas. Could you imagine going to a country you don't know where your going, you can't speak the language, you know it's just like going down the road here saying I'm taking off with nothing in your pockets or nothing. You know those people had a lot of courage. God almighty. And they're the ones that made America what it is. All good families, hard working families.

I worked in a grocery store. Remember the one I was telling you about. I had to learn to speak Finnish. I had to learn a little bit of Greek and I learned to speak some Italian and I learned to speak Yugoslavia fluently, I speak Serbo-Croatian as well as anybody that was born in Yugoslavia. God, what an experience. These ladies that would come in couldn't speak English, they would be Finnish ladies or Italian ladies or Greek ladies. They would point you know. Finally I learned a little here and a little there. I had an education, I'm telling you, you just cannot believe. You cannot believe, just working in that store. Lovely ladies how hard they worked. With their scrub boards, taking care of their homes and little babies and their children and their husbands and all this stuff and their husbands working in the mines. You should have seen how hard people worked and the conditions they lived in. But they lived in pretty good conditions. They had heat in their homes and their homes were clean. They didn't have TV and most of them didn't have a radio. I remember when we first got our radio, a Montgomery Wards radio, it was an Airline. Why we were in seventh heaven. You lived so simply but there was much more happiness than there is now. I mean those people were the ones that are the foundation of America. I think about them quite often. When I think about one I will say a prayer for them.



**I understand that you were a great baseball player. Tell me what it was like being in sports when you grew up.**

It was the most gratifying experience I had as a little boy. I wasn't great I was just a regular boy. (Phone rang, where was I? **About the sports**) Well God blessed me with a lot of strength. When I worked in the grocery store it was part of my development. I was only 16 years old. I worked there for 6 years. I was the delivery truck. I carried things 6 – 8 – 10 blocks away. I got so powerful I carried 100-pound sacks. In those days when people bought flour, they bought 100 pound sacks. They bought potatoes; they bought 100 pound sack of potatoes. If they bought onions they bought a 50-pound sack. If they bought sugar they bought a 100-pound of sugar. Everything was big weight. I got so I carried 100 pounds of sugar or whatever on my shoulder and 100 pounds of spuds under my arm. I walked 8 or 10 blocks. In fact I was so strong the kids in the Grant School would be kicking the football in the lot and I would set my things down and kick with them for awhile then go on an deliver my stuff. I got so strong, I could take and throw a football 80 yards, I swear, and I would throw a baseball so hard and I would throw it so hard it would look like an aspirin tablet. And I was only 18 years old and I did so well here that the Hollywood Stars gave me a tryout down in California. That was like the big leagues. That was down in Elsinore, California. I had never been out of Silver Bow County. And I got on the train and all these colored guys on the train; they were so nice to me and all that. And I'm going to California to try out for the Hollywood Stars and there was a doctor from Butte. Dr. Scott. Did you ever hear of Dr. Netterberg? He's working on the cancer, you know. Well Dr. Scott is the man who invented the deal that Dr. Netterberg is working on. And Dr. Scott and I visited on the train and I got so lonesome by myself on that damn train. I didn't know what to do so I bought a pack of cigarettes on that train and I started puffing on the cigarettes. When I got to Elsinore, California, they had been training for about 3 weeks before I got there. There was a coach there, a pitching coach named John Miljus, one of the best pitchers in the big leagues and he was a Serb and he said to me kid you go out there in the outfield. He gave me my equipment and everything. He said to me I don't want you to throw for a couple of days, I want you to loosen up and to get in shape. Get your legs in shape so you go out there in the outfield. You jog back and forth and stay on you toes. And he forgot about me and I was out there. They practiced for 6 hours and I was jogging back and forth for 6 hours, you know what I mean. And that night we sat down to have dinner and I went to get up and my legs locked. My muscles just were locked. I could hardly walk; they should have brought me crutches. And instead in about 8 days later they sent me in to pitch against Fullerton. This was just a scrimmage game before we started the regular schedule. We played the Chicago Cubs and all those teams. And they put me into pitch and I could only stride about this far (he showed about a foot). Couldn't stride like I should. And something snapped in my arm. And I could never throw a fastball or a hard ball again. I had an arm; God blessed me with an arm that was unbelievable. But it all worked out. It broke my heart. I came back to Butte and played. I was one of the leading hitters here and everything like that but I couldn't pitch again. I could pitch so hard that the catcher couldn't catch my ball.

The YMCA use to run all the athletic programs and they did a beautiful job. Basketball and everything! They were terrific. You know what I mean? The YMCA had basketball programs, they had church programs. They did a job you couldn't believe and we played with the Grant School. We won the championship in baseball and in football and we went to Washington Jr. High. You know you went there from the Grant, which went to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We won the basketball championship. We had athletics you couldn't believe. That's why Butte High teams were so great. Those kids from the east side made Butte High. Those kids from the west side, from McKinley their folks worked for the banks and the Montana Power Co. would come out in their beautiful uniforms and we'd rip them to shreds. We'd go through them like a dose of salts. It was amusing. (Giggling). You're bringing back a lot of fond memories. The more I think about the things I went thru the humbler I get. I was fortunate. God was good to me and my family.

### **What was it like being the Grand Marshall of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade?**

Well they came to me and asked me to be the Grand Marshall. There is a picture right there someplace. (**Mr. Koprivica's wall is full of pictures, plaques, and other memorabilia. Pictures of the memorabilia are on the disc.**) They're right up there, Betty and I. **What year was that in?** I don't know I have enough memorabilia to write 10 books. Anyway they asked me to be the Grand Marshall and I told them I would accept, my wife and I would. And they asked me a few questions. I had been in the parade for maybe 30 years. We had the most beautiful floats. I have so many pictures I can't put them up. We use to have the number one floats most of the time. We participated in everything for our community. Give it a sense of life. They asked me what it would be like to be Grand Marshall and I think it's quite an honor. And they said how do you feel about it? I said I didn't know how I feel because I have been in so many parades and I never saw the front of the parade or the entire parade, I've been in the middle of the parade with our floats and that. All I saw was the front and the back. So that's all I know about that. But that was very kind of them.

### **When did you meet your wife?**

I met my wife shortly before I went in the army in World War II. I went in the army and I came back. I saw her some place and she asked me to come down and visit her. **(Is she a Butte girl?)** Yes she was a Butte girl. She died. She was married prior to my marrying her and she had three kids. Her husband was killed in a mine accident before World War II. She was a widow with 3 children. A lot of people frowned on widows. And I thought why should she be cast aside because she had three children. And I had a mother to take care of and a sister to take care of or I probably would have married her sooner. But I had to wait for the opportune time to marry her. Cuz I couldn't do all these things at one time. But it all worked out. God blessed me with a beautiful son, one of the finest businessmen in the world. His daughter is a ballerina with the San Francisco ballet. She just turned 18. My daughter Jennifer has two wonderful boys. They live close to me; they come and see me. So. I'm a wealthy man in everything that counts, family and friends. **(I have two beautiful kids so I know.)** They are so special, always listen to them and always be careful whom they associate with. You know I know some of the finest people in this community who have lost their children to this terrible environment. Drugs, gangs and all that. And they can't blame the parents, it's the environment. We've got to clean up the environment.

## CONCLUSION

**Bob Koprivica is one of the most interesting people I have ever met. He has given above and beyond the call of duty to the Butte community and I am glad I was able to interview him for my Butte History Class. His interest, especially in the youth of Butte, Montana, the United States, and the world has been recognized by many organizations. I hope I was able to touch on some of his accomplishments in this paper.**