



RELEASE FORM

I hereby give and grant to the Butte Historical Society as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Society shall determine, according to the regulations of the Society, all rights, including copyrights, to my tape-recorded memoirs, except for such restrictions specified below.

I also specifically grant Teresa Jordan, for valuable consideration, the right to use all or any part or paraphrase of any of my statements (with the exception of restrictions listed below) in connection with her proposed work of non-fiction provisionally titled Butte, America: Lessons From a Deindustrialized Town, as well as related articles. I understand that, unless restricted below, my name and photo may be used in the work and in related advertising and publicity.

Restrictions: *This agreement does not grant copyright to ~~words~~ song sung on tape, Butte City Ballad.*

March 19 1986
Date of Agreement

x Robert J. Kovacich
Narrator

1429 Warren Ave.
Address

Butte, MT 59701
City, State, Zip

Teresa Jordan
Interviewer

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12 April 1988
Accession date

Mary Murphy
Archivist



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NOTES ON USING MATERIALS FROM

"IS THERE LIFE AFTER COPPER?" ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Because of limited funds available for this project, audited transcriptions of the tapes were not possible. However, there are detailed notes for most of the interviews. The user should be aware of a few limitations on the use of these notes. Unless otherwise specified, the notes were taken at the time of the interview and were not later audited against the tape. They can give you a good idea of what was covered in the interview. However, if you find something specific that interests you, you should verify it with the tape. Because the notes were taken quickly during the interview, they may include inaccuracies. If you use information for attribution, you must go back to the original tape.

There are rough transcriptions for many of the interviews. Again, because of time and funds available, these transcriptions were not later audited against the tape. They are more accurate than the notes, but again, if you use information for attribution, check it against the original tape.

A few interviews have restrictions against use of the tape. The notes for these have generally been read and corrected by the subject of the interview and are accurate. Check the releases for further information.

Bob Kovacich, English teacher at East Junior High School and musician, interviewed at his home by Teresa Jordan, March 19, 1986.

Notes taken at time of interview; not audited against tape; not a transcript.

Bob's father was a contract miner for 47 years. He had silicosis; got no compensation for it because it wasn't bad enough. Bob had one brother who died; three other boys in the family, two girls. Bob's brother Joe mined--worked 18 years for the ACM as a ropeman. Laid off.

Bob's other brother worked 10 or 12 years in California; is now in Denver, works for United Airlines.

Bob's father was a "copperhead." He belonged to the Butte Miners Union--but he always stood up for the Company. He said, the company built his house--it was built out of carstakes, other materials from the Company. In later years, he felt that the BMU was pushing too much on the Company. During the depression, he could see it, when you almost had to kill to keep your job. But in later years, in the '60's, working underground, he would have to wait for someone from another union to help him on something outside of his jurisdiction underground. He was upset about that. It cost him time, making his contract. He retired around 1971; died in 1981. He mined all those years. Before the strike in '45, he had the potential to become a super, but he went on strike with the miners, lost that chance. He was a miner the rest of his life.

Q: The contract miners were really the cream of the crop in Butte.

Before the Pit, the contract miners were it! Butte's demise was due to the pit. Contract miners were highly skilled, the best paid. Bob's father topped the board at the Leonard--he was the first to hit \$67 a day. Bob remembers that. He had gone to pick his father up at the mine, they checked the board. That was in 1956 or '57.

Bob was always proud of his dad. He was one of the best miners you ever came across. Gutch Robinson told Bob he couldn't believe what he had learned from Bob's dad, the efficiency with which he could use a crude tool. The old miners still remember Bob's dad.

He took Bob underground during a Christmas vacation when Bob got a job with the Company. They were driving a raise. Bob remembers looking up at those big jagged rocks. He wouldn't let Bob go near them. He'd hit it with a jimmie bar, it would come down; he knew where the right spot was, where it was soft.

He had had a partner, Thidrick (sp?). A rock came down, broke

his partners neck.

Bob can remember his father coming home, limping, or his shoulder hurt from a fall of rock.

Bob never considered being a miner or not getting an education. Only his sister Joannie and he went to college. Bob played guitar, that paid for his college.

They lived in McQueen. When Bob and Germaine first married, they rented a place in McQueen that had been a bar to live in--\$13.50 a month rent. His father put a bathtub in it. Germaine and Bob have six kids; none of them are still at home.

Q: What was your father's attitude toward your going to college?

He was proud; he helped Bob all he could. He drove him there the first day--the Western Montana College of Education (Dillon). He didn't want his kids in the mines. Joe worked above ground--it was a great job, really. Working for the Company was the best job in town--\$13 an hour.

Kovacich is Yugoslavian. Both Bob's father and mother were born and raised in McQueen. They lost the family home to the pit, but the Company gave his father the best deal he could get. He always said the house was built by the company [with Company materials]. He had a \$50,000 home built out of Company property. He packed everything out. No one would leave work without at least a bucket of nails. Bob thinks one reason the Company failed was the large amount of theft.

Q: There seems to be an ethic in Butte--stealing from the Company is OK, but you don't steal from real people.

Bob and Germaine disagree--their house has been broken into twice, their cars and trucks broken into, vandalized.

Q: Why do you think there is so much vandalism here?

Bob thinks it's synonomous with New York City. We're the same kind of people. When Bob was in the service, a lot of people thought he was from New York. They couldn't believe he was from Butte, though he was putting them on.

Q: Can you define Butte Rats?

The term originated with intramural basketball teams. A Butte Rat is a rounder, one who drinks, fights. When Bob was at Dillon, he was at a beer bust at a friend's house. They picked up a drunk off the street, sat him on the step. Bob put a knife at his throat--made him drink two large milk shake glasses full of beer, said he would slit his throat if he didn't drink it. Then Bob broke a picture over his head. Fraternity sort of stuff. When Butte kids were studying, they would throw a butcher knife at the wall. He was asked to leave college, along with his

friend Lubich. Lubich stayed; Bob left for two years. They were told they were too immature.

Q: Why do you think Butte kids had that sort of attitude?

Bob says, "Only Butte people would think of doing those types of things. Why, I don't know. There is a certain aloofness to life, I don't know what it is, a mining town. Most of your mining towns are like that, you go to any mining town and you find a recklessness...[it comes from] maybe living in a mining community because you don't know, when you go down that hole, if you're ever going to come out again. Maybe that's it. You are brought up with that hard rock miner syndrome where you're tough. Anybody that would go underground and do those things has to be." It was a heavy gambling town.

Bob wrote a song, Butte City Ballad. A friend of his told him that when he dies, he wants that song sung at his funeral.

Bob was in the Renegades, the Summer Wind, the Tinkle Plunk and Boom, and now has the Bob Kovacich band. They play polkas, rock, old standards.

His old friend Lubich coached at Montana State, is now down in Arizona somewhere. They were playing baseball in college, both went for the same ball. Hit heads so hard Bob broke his skull, Lubich broke his cheek. They were in such bad shape last rites were said over them. They were in the hospital for a couple of weeks; terrorized the place. Bob rolled Lubich down the stairs in his wheelchair. They ran away from the hospital, wearing just their hospital gowns, open in the back. Someone called the hospital--you have two escapees, crossing the street. That was in Dillon. Their clothes had been left in their lockers after the accident, so they didn't have any clothes to leave in. They wanted out of there.

Q: Butte has always been known as a buddy town. Why do you think that is?

Bob isn't sure, but you stick together, you are tight. Maybe it's the bars, the drinking together, getting to know each other. Bob started drinking in 1952, in 8th grade. You just have this deep love for one another. Butte kids hang together. They had the Wednesday Afternoon Social Club.

Tape 1, Side B

Q: How does the rest of the state view Butte?

Bob thinks that the appellation Butte, America answers it. He has that on his handball jacket--Ace Kovacich, Butte America. Germaine has it on her bowling shirt. Butte doesn't even say it's in Montana, just America.

There has always been intense high school rivalry, especially

among AA and A schools. And everybody wants to get Butte.

Q: Why do you think Butte has always excelled in sports more than any other town?

Bob thinks it's a matter of heart, the desire to be a winner. Things are so economically depressed here.

Q: Can you tell me about the McQueen relocation.

McQueen was a nice community. The Company was fair about relocation, more than fair. Bob and Germaine could have bought the house across the street from Bob's folks for about \$6,000; the company gave the owner about \$40,000. Bob's mother got about \$22,000; they had paid \$500 for it. Of course, they had improved it.

Bob's father stuck up for the Company until the day he died. Joe, Bob's brother, is not working, but he would probably do the same.

Everyone thought the Company would last forever. Bob says, "I never thought it would end because of the fact that, being the richest hill on earth, copper would last forever. And then when copper became went down as a second or third class mineral because they were using plastics, copper is almost useless now, its down to, I don't know, 50c a pound if it's that much -- who would think that it would be like that? I always thought that copper was really an important metal. Maybe if we got a big war going on, WWII, it would pick up again." (laughs)

Q: Would you ever consider leaving Butte?

Bob would like to move to someplace else, possibly. Like Albuquerque--good summers, mild winters. Or Reno.

Q: Many people feel very deep roots here.

Yes, like Bob Wilcox, who plays keyboard for Bob. He was in the service, then two years in Los Angeles, working in a liquor store. He sent an application to Montana Power. They called him up with an opening--this was 20 years ago. They called on a Friday, said they had an opening in the gas department. Asked when he could be there. He said, when does the job start? They said, it will be open Monday. He said I'll be there Monday morning at 8:00." His wife said "I'm not leaving." He said, fine, I'm going back." He came back; two weeks later, his wife joined him.

Bob says, "you have a lot of personable people here. And you can develop develop friendships easily here whereas you can't in other places. Like 60 miles away from here, I think, Helena people -- I hate Helena people. Great Falls isn't bad, Billings, I don't know what that's like. I was around Helena people for almost 10 years, going up to Canyon Ferry and that, and never

could get along with them." [Q: what's the difference? How do you define it?] "Personalities. I don't know what it is, too, because you have just as many crooks here in Butte, just as many backstabbers, just as many people you can't trust, but it's just the personality of a lot of people in Butte, I guess. They really go out of their way to help you here.

Q: How would you define Butte values or ethics?

People are proud of Butte, proud to say they are from Butte. Proud to tell anyone anywhere they are from Butte. If you need help, they are there to do it. For instance, Bob has a rental property. If he needs any help with the plumbing, he has a friend Smiley who works for the Water Co; he'll do it. Later, he'll ask Bob for a few favors. Bob has a friend who helps him with his motor cycles. A carpenter friend helped them take a window off. Bob just played an anniversary party for a friend, didn't charge. Bob says, "I just know that anytime that any of my friends, if I ever needed any help, they are there to do it. Help one another out, whenever you need it."

Bob's roots are with his friends here. He doesn't have much to do with his family.

He teaches 8th grade English at East Junior High. He also has a major in social studies, but he doesn't like to teach it; too boring.

Q: Do the kids think there is something special about Butte?

Bob has them write an essay on "Butte, my town--I like it, or I don't" It splits about 50/50 between liking and not. Not very detailed; they are 8th graders, immature minds.

Q: What are the reasons kids don't like it?

They feel like there is not much to do, but when they do get things, they don't support it--like concerts. Concerts all lose money. Right now, the Power Pull is coming to Butte--big trucks. The kids are excited about that. Night clubs have always been well supported here--the best supported thing. At one time, we were the only town to have a bar on every block. Not as many now. The state government is working to close bars down.

Q: How do you see the effects of the shutdown on your kids?

Kids in 8th grade don't show the effects of the shutdown. They are supposed to write with pens; they will come to class without one. Bob lets them borrow a pen, but he has to have collateral. They give him dollar bills, \$5 bills, 10's and 20's. They get it back at the end of the class when they return the pen, but they have money in their pockets. You would never know there were financial problems. Kids talk new cars, motorcycles, snow mobiles. Bob's brother Joe has been off four or five years. He leads a good life. Has three or four cars, his house is paid

for, he bought the kids motorcycles. Bob doesn't know how he does it.

Q: A lot of new jobs have opened up in Butte...

Yes, but they are all financed with Federal money. If Butte had to survive on itself, it would be in trouble. Now, with MADD and SADD, the bars are losing money. Dances used to be big. But they aren't as much any more. Very few people get really drunk anymore. Dances have decreased in number. Bob has only two booked in April.

Bob hates insurance companies so much that he doesn't have insurance on anything. He has four cars, and he has no liability or anything. He has had it a couple times, but they just raise the rates on him.

Settlements are outrageous; that's because of the trial lawyers.

Q: Butte is experiencing many changes, moving away from a blue collar town. What's lost in the changes?

Our heritage is lost. Bob feels you have to make the best out of it; maybe it will be for the better. Mining destroyed the environment, the land. It took Columbia Gardens, carved up the Mountains and the hills. Butte looks like Appalachia. Yes, people made money off the mining, but it didn't make up for what was destroyed. Bob is pessimistic that Washington Corps will start mining. He thinks they just bought the mines for a write off.

Tape 2, Side B

A lot of people would like to go back to when Butte was a wide open town--gambling, bustling town. People voted for the gambling laws to be eased a few years back; the legislature decided they didn't know what they voted for; kept the laws tight. Bob is reluctant to vote. The Phillipines has nothing on us. [Ferdinand Marcos was just deposed as president of the Phillipines after he led a very crooked election.]

Q: What do you think of Butte politicians?

Bob thinks they work for Butte. He thinks that the majority of them would like to see gambling again, would like to see the wide open town, the economy thriving. Education would benefit from gambling. but you gotta fight the church. The separation of church and state is a fallacy. The statue on the hill [Our Lady of the Rockies] shows that this is a very religious community.

Q: What do you think about the Our Lady project?

Bob didn't donate for it, didn't do anything for it. His mother does. She calls Bob an atheist for not believing in it. Bob has friends who think it's great. But Bob has heard that it costs

\$500 a month to light it; and East Junior High has a crack in it that the rain comes through.

Property taxes are high. Montana is something like second in the nation for high property taxes. A lottery would help; gambling. Eventually, Bob thinks we will have a sales tax. We are not making it without it. Every time the legislature takes away something that is illegal, immoral, or fattening, homeowners have to make up for the revenue lost.

Germaine has been a cocktail waitress for 25 years; Bob has played music in bars. All the extras they have come from bars--8 motorcycles, a boat, extra money. Bob pays the main bills with his teaching; music, etc is extra money.

Q: Have you been surprised over how well Butte has done?

Yes. Not that many houses for sale. Taxes have increased here, but basically we are doing well. Great Falls has cut their teachers by 29; Anaconda by 11; Butte wants to hire 10. But Butte mill levies increase. Bob has coffee each morning at Joes Pasties Shop--everyone in there gives teachers hell for the taxes, and Bob agrees.

Q: What hurts Butte?

We are losing our youth. The young college kids leave because there is nothing here. The old people die. People Bob and Germaine's age are left. Unions and taxes hurt. The union can kill a town; so can taxes. Industry won't move in. They read that when ARCO leaves it owes \$14M taxes--they see that, they aren't going to move in. Motel 6 tried to come in; unions blew up the shack, destroyed it. That scares other businesses away. McDonalds came in because kids can work there. Bob is not in the Musicians union--he fought it for 10 years before he dropped out five years ago. He has a three piece band, would have to pay the union for a five piece band. At the Thrift Inn, they have a five piece minimum--Bob would have to hire two people to do nothing in order to work there. When he quit, the union kept chasing him, trying to get him to pay dues again. Now it is defunct. The bartenders union is the same. Bob makes more non union--union scale was \$45 for a five hour gig. Bob makes \$100. He could see the union in the 1920's, but it wasn't needed after the 60's.

Q: What works for Butte?

The legislature has gotten lots of Federal money for construction--like Harrison Avenue and Old Park Street.

Bob & Germaine's kids are 22 to 31. Danny is in Seattle, as is Pudge (check name); daughter Robin is in Idaho; Laurie is in Madeira, Colorado; another daughter is in Germany.

Butte's red light district was the biggest in the North West at one time. Blond Edna was before Bob's time, but he knew where 14

South Wyoming was. He knew Beverly Snodgrass--she had great parties, would invite them. One night, he sang to her over the phone. She had the Missoula Rooms on Mercury Street. Butte should have preserved 14 South Wyoming; it's a parking lot now. All of Uptown will be a parking lot someday.

Bev treated everyone well. When they finished playing, they would go down to her place, drink, play guitar. It was sort of an after hours place for them. She spent lots of money in Butte. She sponsored the Renegades softball team. She was shutdown in around '70 or the late '60's. Bob tutored her in a correspondence course in writing, and English. He tutored her for about six months. Jo Anne had the Imperial. All were good people. They would donate to anything. They wouldn't buy just a raffle ticket; they would buy both. They were shut down by the blue noses.

At end of tape, Bob sings Butte City Ballad.

Chris Martin would have good information. He owns Room '71. He has been a bartender all his life. He's in his 60's.