

Damon Cott, junior at Butte High School, member of speech team, interviewed at the Butte-Silver Bow Archives by Teresa Jordan, March 10, 1986.

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

Damon was born in Tennessee, lived in different parts of the Southeast before coming to Montana. His father is a hot gas specialist, works for MHD. Damon is unclear on just exactly what he does. They moved here seven years ago from Huntsville, Alabama; that was a larger place than Butte, probably around 60,000.

The Cottts live in the Highlands. His mother is a substitute teacher--chemistry and math, primarily.

Damon was in 2nd grade when they came here; he doesn't remember it really well. It was different than Huntsville. He hadn't liked Huntsville much; didn't like Butte at first. Now he likes it more--or rather, likes Montana, not necessarily Butte so much.

His father was happy about the move, about being near a wilderness, being able to ride his bicycle to work. His mother likes it here now; he doesn't know what she thought at the time they moved, he's never asked her. He also has an older brother, Craig, who is in medical school in Oklahoma; a younger sister Jamie in 8th grade at East Junior High; and a younger sister, Kimmie, three years old.

Q: Have you travelled much to other places?

Damon has travelled to visit relatives in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Washington D.C.; has taken other family vacations. Not a lot of travel, but some.

Q: After seeing other places, how do you feel about Butte?

Damon enjoyed other places like D.C. On the other hand, he lived a short while in Oklahoma City, and thinks that is a terrible place.

He also lived a year in Bozeman while his mother got her teaching certificate. He liked the town at first, thought he would like it better than Butte. But it is more cliquish than Butte. Now that he is on the speech team, he would fit in there better; there is a good speech team there.

He doesn't think Butte is very cliquish; at least they are not tight-knit cliques. There are, however, styles you have to pay attention to. There is not as much diversity here as he thinks there are some places. Here, people tend to be a lot the same.

For instance, he has a friend from Denver. Here, all the girls have the same hair style--shoulder length, curly. His friend says that in his school in Denver, no one would have the same hairstyle as someone else. If you did, you would change it. Maybe that is the same conformity as here but in reverse. Yet, it is different.

There is a thriving drug clique here, but that clique doesn't have a distinguishable style of its own.

Q: When I was in school there were very identifiable groups--the jocks, the hippies, the greasers, the brains...

Damon laughs, says he is sort of interested in being a hippie. The jocks and druggies cross over a fair amount. Then there are the pure jocks, and the pure druggies. There is a brain group that is really into school work. And of course a reject group that welcomes everyone. Damon says he is in that group part of the time.

Q: Most interesting people are... What are the issues kids talk about?

Damon doesn't think they are really concerned with any. There isn't any interest in social issues. The schools does well in sports. Elsewhere, people are just concerned with doing their own thing.

Q: You hear that kids now are very career oriented, interested in making \$50,000 a year...

Damon says he sees that on the speech team; there are about three who are really career oriented. And others are as well.

Damon is sort of interested in being a hippie. No one else here has any interest in that. They don't even know what it was. But he is interested in social issues, and in individuality, with not trying to fit into any particular group.

Q: Is there a lot of pressure to conform?

Not pressure so much as a sense of indifference to being different. There are the basic groups, but like the druggie groups doesn't have a style or identity of its own.

Q: Why do you think that's true?

Damon isn't sure. Maybe it's the economy, the feeling that Butte has faded away. On the whole, there doesn't seem to be a lot of drive. The brains have drive, but other than that, a lot of people seem to be drifting.

Q: Have you been very aware of the mine shutdown?

Damon hasn't personally been affected because his family wasn't involved with it. But one of his friend's fathers was laid off.

Q: The availability of jobs in the mine was always a sort of security for Butte people; do you see a sense that that has changed?

Probably. A lot of kids plan to leave Butte when they graduate. Damon has been trying to get a job. He would like to work in a theater or as a bicycle mechanic. Beyond that, he has been looking for work at McDonalds or anything. Hasn't been able to find anything.

Q: Is that true with other kids you know?

Yes. Lots of kids work for their parents. If they can't do that, they try to get jobs at McDonalds, or fast food places.

Q: What do you want to do after you get out of high school?

Damon doesn't really know. He'd like to get a job, drive around the country for awhile, decide at that time what he wants to do. He was in Junior Achievement for awhile, was Vice President in charge of production for his company. He hated it. They made little things to sell; He felt they were making garbage to sell to people who didn't know any better. He knows he doesn't want to be in business.

He knows things he doesn't want to do, but isn't sure what he wants to do yet. He is almost sure it won't involve anything around here. To stay here, he would have to work for someone else or have a small business.

Q: What do you think of Our Lady of the Rockies?

Damon is "agin it."

Q: Did it sort of surprise you that it actually happened?

Yes. Damon hadn't seen that sort of community spirit at the high school. He doesn't know that that was the right project for all that support. It seemed that people wanted to feel like they were doing something important, with a higher reason rather than just living day to day, doing their job.

Q: Why do you think it happened now rather than five years ago, or ten years?

Maybe it was the lack of anything else. People saw nothing else which would have physical results; no way to being in an industry that would give 1000 jobs. He feels that people put effort into something that seemed would have importance,

but Damon doesn't think it will make a difference. It would have been better to do something concrete. He remembers a letter to the editor in the Standard complaining about rock and roll, likening it to devil worship. That was the same sort of thing. The writer got worked up about that rather than trying to deal with more important things that really mattered. The Our Lady people ignored more important things, spent energy on something that didn't really matter. He feels they tried to make God responsible for the situation here; to MAKE things right. But we've been asking God to make things right for 2000 years. He says, show me the result. It's time to look out for yourself. It is irresponsible to put it in God's hands when, if he's out there at all, he hasn't done anything yet. It's an excuse to give up.

Q: What was the attitude about it in school?

Some kids were involved, tried to get contributions. But mainly, there was not much interest either way. Damon and friends sometimes while away the hours in American Studies discussing plans to blow it up. (laughs). The impression he gets is that most of the kids don't think about it.

Q: Where do you go for good conversation?

He gets it on the speech team, if at all. Mostly, when he tries to talk about things, he gets blank looks, or people think he is trying to impress them. But when he talks about things, he is just trying to understand. His friends say, don't worry about it, or do something practical. For this reason, other people talk to him more than he does to them. He is just trying to figure out how things work.

Q: What's the appeal of Rambo and the new militarism?

Damon thinks it is a sense of belonging, it is unquestionable, pure. The pleasure of having an enemy, something to fight against. It's a backlash to the 60's. The 60's ideas lost momentum as a driving force, but were still floating around, cliches.

There is solace in the idea that I'm an American, we're better than anyone else. Anyone who attacks us is less than American, "trying to take our freedom away." Damon sees the contradiction in that; they don't want freedom, they want the opposite. He recalls a Garfield cartoon. Garfield is wearing a headband, "freedom fighter." Goes into a pet shop, opens the cages, yells, "You're free, you're free." The animals cringe back into their cages. He closes them again, says, "you're secure, you're secure."

Q: Does this come because there are so many choices now--drugs, sex, career choices....

With all the choices, you have no true security. It's easier to pretend there are rules. This is good always; this is bad always.

Q: Do you see a rise in evangelical Christianity as well?

~~Butte has always had the churches play an important role. Damon doesn't see high school students talking differently than their parents. If the parents are evangelists, they are.~~

From debate, Damon has learned how easy it is to mislead people. You can make a case for either side. In debate, you debate one side one round, the other the next. In one round you destroy the very points you made in the last one. So he has the attitude, "don't tell me, show me." Because you can make a case for anything. And he believes that the truth can stand against anything brought against it. But with the evangelists he has met, they say their beliefs are unquestionable. He doesn't agree.

Q: Militarism has accompanied evangelism to some extent around the nation--the TV evangelists, for instance. Do you see that here?

Kids don't talk about those things. They mainly talk about who's going out with whom. Or say things like "nuke Khaddafi" without trying to explain why. There is one neurotic girl in the lunchroom who is convinced she is going to hell. She had an impure thought once or something. Now she is talking about, if she is going to hell anyway, she should break out, be wild. But as far as Damon can see, it's just talk.

Q: To what degree are drugs and alcohol in the schools?

Alcohol is very pervasive; drugs somewhat less. Probably 5% of the kids are really messed up.

At one time, Damon was interested in the druggie group, thought maybe they were interesting. But he found they are really just killing time. They don't have any illusions about it.

He knows there is marijuana in the schools, doesn't think there is too much that is really hard. There is all manner of alcohol.

Tape 2, Side A

Q: Do kids drink at school, or mostly on the weekends?

Mostly on the weekends. The overwhelming majority drink. Probably half the kids drink a lot. There is probably a good percentage of alcoholics.

Q: What do you like about Butte?

The landscape, Montana in general, the wilderness. He likes the

historical sense of Butte--he is not that involved with the history, but it is interesting to ride his bike around the old mines. It's like an empire that's gone, or ruins, or something big that was. There are hints that remain. It's fun to feel that sense of history, but it doesn't really matter. It's not that important. He is more aware of the feel of it than the specifics. But he gets the idea it was really flush; there was money everywhere. The area back behind the pit--there's an old mine there, he thinks it might have been a gold mine. You can see the entrance and the hoist house. But there is earth piled 130 feet all around it, dirt that was moved there from the pit. Why didn't they cover it? Damon wonders. Down around the mine entrance, weeds grow. Up above it, on the mine dumps, nothing grows. There are huge tires from the pit trucks. You can see the tracks where people have rolled the tires down, trying to hit the mine and hoist house. One bashed through the wall of the hoist house, is resting on some machinery. For some reason, that mine was saved; now it is being destroyed for entertainment.

Q: What don't you like?

Butte is too conservative. It is set in a specific way, not moving or changing. There are not a lot of ideas or people who think and have ideas. You can go through life without thinking; you can go through school without really thinking about anything. You learn to solve math problems, but you don't have to think about why things happen, or what motives people have. Most people don't have any thoughts about things like that.

Q: Do you sense that it's different elsewhere?

It seems different in Bozeman, around the college, MSU. But still, it is just a sense Damon has that it is different there. Probably only a few do it.

Q: NCAT, MHD, etc have brought a lot of new people into Butte. Do you feel a trickle down from that at school?

One kid builds rockets--not toys, but real rockets, equips them for elementary, with temperature probes, etc, keeps track of how fast they spin.

Most people think Damon is in the brain group, but he is not. He is not that interested in grades.

He knows maybe two kids who are into science things. One is the one who is involved with rocketry, he has also built a wind tunnel. The other is into radio and astronomy. But there is not a very good environment for that at BHS. It is OK to do nothing at BHS, and it is OK to be a really good jock. Not much support for anything else.

Q: How important are sports?

To the people involved with them, very important, and they are

important to a few others. But there is not a sense of community at BHS. More a sense of people thrown together. People clap at the pep assemblies, but they are not that involved.

Q: The wrestling team just won their 7th state championship. How do people feel about that?

They feel pride. Many went to the tournament more to party. But sports aren't that important to most kids.

But if anything is sacred to administration funding, it's sports. Speech isn't sacred--the administration has an indifference to it. In the last couple years, they have been cutting it a lot; and there is not much left to cut. Havre has five coaches. BHS has one assistant coach. She chaperones and fights in the tab room for her students, but she can't really coach us. There are so many events. No one can be expected to help with all of them. BHS has cancelled the speech class. It is the only AA school that doesn't have a drama team; only one which has only an assistant coach who doesn't teach. Individuals have done well, but we're not a team. We could be a power.

Damon has learned Lincoln Douglas completely on his own. After every round, he tries to figure out what he has done wrong. But Butte High has had individuals who are exceptional through the years. They usually send someone to nationals.

Q: Are you familiar with the term Butte Rats? Can you define it?

Damon isn't really familiar with it; thinks it has faded out. But Butte has had a bad reputation with other towns. He doesn't think it is much deserved. But as long as we have it, we might as well live up to it.

On the speech team, other people think Butte kids are retarded. Until they are in a round with us.

Butte, in the past, has been violent. And when we go somewhere, people put down people from Butte. That sometimes leads to a fight. If you are looking for trouble with Butte kids, you can usually find it.