

TRANSCRIPT

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ORAL HISTORY OFFICE

OII 483

SUMMARY

T A P E L O G

TAPE NUMBER

NAME Walter Duncan, Perdita Duncan
Elmo Fortune, William Fenter BIRTHDATE Elmo--1909

ADDRESS es (see release) Butte, MT

SPECIAL INTEREST black community in Butte, 1910s-1940s

OTHERS PRESENT (Note full name and relationship) _____

INTERVIEWED BY Laurie Mercier DATE 3-24-83

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW 2 1/2 hrs. NUMBER OF TAPES 3

RECORDER USED Superscope BRAND OF TAPE Innovator

CASSETTE _____ REEL-TO-REEL _____ QUALITY OF RECORDING fair

DESCRIBE ANY INTERFERENCE _____
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RELEASE OBTAINED RESTRICTIONS FOR USE _____

TRANSCRIBED OR SUMMARIZED BY L. Mercier DATE 5-1-84

SPECIAL CONDITIONS FOR USE OF TAPE _____

BRIEF SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS (accession card) _____

Discuss black community in Butte, 1910s-1940s: Particularly employment, social life,
churches, clubs and white attitudes towards blacks.

INDEX ENTRIES: Butte--social life & customs; blacks; Homestake, MT; miners;

race relations; Silver City Club--Butte; Butte--commerce; names:-----

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

Mary Murphy conducted interview w/ Perdita Duncan (Butte OH collection)

Walter Duncan, Perdita Duncan, Elmo Fortune, William Fenter

Tape 1, Side A

- 0-5 Dr. Duncan reads information about Lena Brown family of Butte (from notes made by Mrs. Brown, who could not attend interview session). Lena's ^{mother's} parents were Charles and Lizzie Flagg: settled Homestake, father a millwright. Grandfather (or father?) owned several mining properties in area. Lena' father: Charles Brown.
- 5-10 Walter describes community of Homestake. Brown boarding house. Perdita Duncan describes some of Butte boarding houses. Brown family a prominent black family. Elmo Fortune describes his family background: mother born in Butte.
- 10-15 Elmo's father a railroad porter. Grandmother lived 1037 Iowa, worked Simon's Dry Goods Store. Parents lived in this house.
- 15-20 Elmo attended Monroe, Butte High schools. Elmo born 1909, Portland, OR. Worked Anaconda smelter 1942-52, worked Butte mines 1952-62. During war worked shipyards Seattle. Perdita wonders how Elmo able to work underground, since blacks traditionally not allowed in mines. Elmo explains that he was one of three blacks allowed to mine; also "Hi" Brown and Bill Brown.
- 20-25 Blacks were never hired to work in Butte mines. Recalls when black WWII soldiers were sent to Butte to mine, miners refused to work with these blacks. ACM put these men on payroll, since had contracted with govt. Walter thinks some of these men stayed in Butte for year or more without ever working. Elmo explains that he was allowed to work underground because a "native" of Butte.
- 25-30 Walter recalls that Filipino workers were injured frequently underground in first years after arrival. Walter and Elmo offer opinions why so many injured. Elmo describes "Filipino raise." Walter explains why thinks Filipinos were harassed.
- 30-32 Elmo recalls how president of local union assured Elmo a job in mines.

Tape 1, Side B

- 0-5 Worked in shafts; chute runner, dynamite blaster. Describes work. Worked with many people, never encountered discrimination. Relationship with other workers. Brown brothers worked as partners. Elmo worked 30 years for ACM; never received pension because of breaks in service.
- 5-10 Walter explains how father came to Butte. Perdita recalls there were many blacks in Butte, enough to support two churches. Walter and Perdita believe there were 1000 blacks in Butte at one time, during 1910s. Employers of blacks: ACM club, construction, private homes.

(Tape 1, Side B, con.)

- 10-15 Elmo describes construction, road work; how started working for smelter.
- 15-20 Walter explains that William Fenter's uncle was in Butte prior to arrival of Walter's dad. Fenter describes uncle's business, Silver Dollar saloon, and how dad ended up in Butte, 1907. Orig. from Arkansas. Other family members. (Interruption). More on Fenter family.
- 20-25 Perdita names some of black families who lived in Butte. William describes picnics group of blacks from Anaconda and Butte had. Perdita and Elmo discuss picnic locations. Why never had picnics at Columbia Gardens. Walter and Perdita claim received harassment from whites, better to choose picnic sites with fewer people.
- 25-30 Walter claims prejudice still exists, just more subtle. Perdita notes that "there was a point here when Butte might as well have been in the deep South." Perdita and Walter recall instances of discrimination, segregation. Elmo remembers being forced to sit in balcony at movie theatre. Walter explains what technique he and white friends used to keep harassment in theatre to minimum: garlic. William notes that this was not general policy at all theatres.
- 30-32 Walter and Perdita describe mother and her encounter with one theatre manager. Perdita notes that there was not neighborhood segregation.

Tape 2, Side A

- 0-5 White churches did not welcome blacks. Notes class segregation at Catholic churches, rich went to St. Patrick's. Two Jewish synagogues. Perdita recalls racism in 1920s. Gamer's particularly inhospitable.
- 5-10 Elmo notes how these feelings, practices of racism have disappeared. Recalls recent special invitation to attend Mormon church. Group describes Methodist and Baptist churches which served blacks. Parties. Blacks not allowed in dance halls. William's mother gave parties often so young people would have place to go.
- 10-15 William claims that Butte was no different, or better, than many other places. Compares to experience living in South: didn't come into contact with many whites, larger black communities. Walter remembers that "I never would feel free to spend my money until I got to Seattle"; difficulties finding places to eat in Butte. William's father able to go places many other blacks not able to, William attributes to fact that most people knew his father. Prejudices of various ethnic groups towards blacks. Walter describes his father, how got into medical profession.

(Tape 2, Side A, con.)

- 15-20 Father studied Univ. Massachusetts. Worked for railroad, decided to return to Butte to practice. Many blacks in Butte because it a r.r. terminus. Walter followed in father's footsteps. Offices in Phoenix building, Miner's Bank, Pennsylvania bldg.
- 20-25 Father had front street office space. Support from local medical community. Started practice 1920; clientele mostly whites, some Native Americans, fewer blacks. Butte as r.r. terminus. Major industry which attracted blacks to Butte. Black teachers.
- 25-30 Black PhDs from Montana. Perdita spent 19 years of youth in Butte, then moved to New York City. Returned to Butte in 1972. Explains why never came back to Butte; more opportunities in East. "I would have wasted my life here." Describes job had in New York.

Tape 2, Side B

- 0-5 Group discusses radio stations, radio programs listened to '30s-40s. Reliance on stations from East for musical entertainment in evenings.
- 5-10 Dances. Usually had to have Caucasian bands; black bands played Silver City Club, got "big pay." Locations where dances held. William notes that went to dances with parents, no babysitting. Perdita, William, Walter and Elmo never touched bootleg liquor. Elmo and Walter in band together.
- 10-15 Elmo describes places where band played. Not allowed in most dance halls; would stand outside to listen. Blacks who were part of traveling road shows had difficulties finding places to eat. Many orchestras, such as Duke Ellington, didn't play in Butte because of opposition from Butte Musician's Union.
- 15-20 Discussion of Duke Ellington, Johnny Mercer. Elmo describes the three black clubs which were active in Butte: Silver City, Missouri, Finley's. "The Silver City Club was a permanent fixture." Owner. Describes rabbit dinners sponsored by club. "That was the black-man's Silver Bow Club."
- 20-25 Silver City Club very popular, attracted customers away from other white clubs uptown. Elmo describes bombing attempts. Other clubs wanted to get rid of Silver City. Black musicians "had more to offer." Tragedies afflicting black musicians.
- 25-30 Appeal of Silver City Club. Elmo describes demise of club. No neighborhood segregation; blacks scattered all over town.
- 30-32 No explanation as to why blacks scattered through town. Perdita thinks other ethnics were segregated because arrived in Butte earlier, clung to traditions.

Tape 3, Side A

- 0-5 None of group thinks there was discrimination for housing. Perdita thinks wealthy employers wanted black help living close by, within walking distance. No discrimination in schools. Walter notes that Y.M.C.A. in Butte notorious for its racism. Walter and Elmo share stories of trying to get in Y in youth: "It was almost sacrilegious. It was almost the same as if you went out and tried to proposition the Virgin Mary, to ask for a membership at the Y.M.C.A." The group notes that this attitude, of course, has changed, all have had children join the Y.
- 5-10 Discrimination at local restaurants. Perdita describes "strolling" as popular pastime in youth, never could go in Gamer's. Even Chinese proprietor at the Temple REstaurant refused service for blacks. Perdita recalls discrimination suits brought against restaurants in New York during 1930s.
- 10-15 Depression years in Butte: Walter recalls that he and father in business, not any worse off than others in town. Walter repeats that "when I wanted to really feel free, I'd go to these medical meetings on the coast, especially if it was in Seattle or Spokane, as soon as I got out of Montana, I felt as if I were taken out and put in another part of the country." Explains why always returned to Butte: cheaper living, practice established. Elmo and William comment that they never had any real problems during depression. William attended college in Arkansas 1934-39.
- 15-20 William thinks people had better time during '30s. Baseball teams. Parties. Perdita talks of living experiences in New York during '30s. Walter doesn't recall people bartering for services very often.
- 20-25 Had much charity work. (William Fenter rises to leave). Walter explains why blacks began to leave Butte late '30s. Perdita claims that "cream of the crop" left because there was nothing for them to do in Butte. Walter and Perdita discuss where many went; many whites left community, too.
- 25-30 Perdita and Walter explain why they prefer designation "colored" as opposed to "black." Perdita notes that other people of color are not pegged "yellow, brown" etc. Offended when has to list racial composite. Recalls something read recently about Indian survivor of Little Big Horn.

End of interview, 2 hrs., 36 mins.