

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TAPE INDEX

Interviewee: Christy Elizabeth E.
 Last First Middle
Date of Interview: March 13, 1980
Place: Butte, Montana
Interviewer: Helen Bresler

Context of the interview: The interview took place in Mrs. Christy's home. I had interviewed her husband earlier in the day, so I think she knew what to expect, but she was a bit nervous at first. Like so many other people I've talked to, she seemed to think that she didn't know anything that could be very important. However, we established good rapport right away.

Mrs. Christy has a wonderful memory, and she remembered many details about things. She knows quite a bit about her family history, and she showed me some pictures of her grandmother and great grandmother.

The Christys' house is very comfortable, and it is furnished with beautiful old fashioned furniture. They are justifiably proud of it.

Tape #1
Side 1

Mrs. Christy was born in Missoula, and lived there until she was nine years old. She can remember when the Higgins Avenue bridge was built. She can also remember when the post office was built. Her family lived across the street from Central School.

Mrs. Christy's family moved to Butte because her father, who was a painter couldn't find work in Missoula. Butte was booming at that time. There were always people on the streets. Saloons stayed open all night.

Mrs. Christy liked Missoula better than Butte because in Missoula her family had a nice yard. Her family lived in an apartment when they first moved to Butte. They moved to the Flat after a year, and then her father built his own house. He built it all by himself with just a little help from some friends. That house had a yard.

Mrs. Christy's mother never worked. Women didn't work in those days unless they had to. There wasn't much work for women. They could take in ironing, or clean houses. Married women couldn't work in stores. If you got married you were fired. Teachers couldn't be married either. There was no relief then, and no Social Security.

Mrs. Christy doesn't remember that there were very many poor people in Butte. Her family wasn't rich, but they always had enough. In some families, the oldest boys had to go to work in the mines to support the family. Only the rich people were able to take vacations.

Mrs. Christy liked going to school. She didn't belong to any clubs because she didn't know of any. Also, her family lived on the Flat, and it would have been hard to come back uptown for meetings. Women weren't allowed in the YMCA. There were a lot of skating rinks in town, and Mrs. Christy went skating every

night after school. In the summer they went on picnics. Children could go to Columbia Gardens free on the streetcars every Thursday, and they used to take their lunches and go there. There was a big pansy field where they could pick flowers. There were all kinds of rides and concessions at Columbia Gardens, and a big dance hall. Big bands that came through would play out there. The high schools used to have their graduation dances there. Other organizations also held dances there.

Butte used to have wonderful parades. The circus used to parade through town, and the parade would sometimes be more than a mile long. The circuses used to be much larger, and they would set up the big tent instead of having it in an auditorium. They set up the tent where the Albertson's store is now. Circuses came every year. The Ringling Brothers Circus came every year.

Mrs. Christy's mother bought groceries from Mr. Christy's store. She met Mr. Christy there, and they started going out when she was about fifteen. They got married when she was nineteen, at Christmas time in 1923. The wedding was in Mrs. Christy's home. Weddings were not elaborate then, unless the families were wealthy.

After they were married, Mr. and Mrs. Christy moved into an apartment close to their store on Granite and Crystal. Someone broke into their store and stole thirteen sacks of sugar, which was real scarce then, so they fixed up an apartment in back of the store, and moved in there. When their son, George, was born, they moved into an apartment down the street. When their daughter was born, they bought the house that they live in now.

Their house is in the area that was once the fashionable part of town. The neighborhood has been gradually deteriorating since then.

Mrs. Christy remembers when there were many unmarried men in Butte who lived in boarding houses. There were hundreds of single men here. Back then, most men wouldn't get married until they had a little money put away.

People in Butte used to have lovely parties. Mrs. Christy had forty people at her house once. Everyone dressed beautifully. The ladies always wore hats and gloves when they went to town. People wore their best clothes when they went uptown. People were gracious, and everybody helped everyone else.

A woman was safe anywhere in Butte.

People didn't take offense at ethnic names then. People in Butte called each other Bohunks, Chinks, Niggers, Harps, Micks, Cousin Jacks, and Cousin Jennys. Mrs. Christy's father was from Canada, and he was called a Canuck. The Italians called each other Dagoes.

Everyone always got drunk and fought on St. Patrick's Day. The Irish just fought for fun. The other ethnic groups didn't fight as much as the Irish.

There used to be three big department stores downtown.

Everybody had to have a new outfit on Easter. Even if there was still snow, everyone had white shoes and gloves, and a new coat if they could afford it. They all went to church then.

The stores uptown had all kinds of merchandise. One store sometimes brought in Paris gowns. There were some very rich people here who could afford them.

Tape #1
Side 2

The rich women were rather snobbish, although the men weren't. The top

men in the Company would mingle with the miners. The rich women had servants.

Mrs. Christy always had a girl to help, too. Lots of girls from the country would come into town to go to school, and they would work for families for room and board. No one could pay them. This is the kind of girl that Mrs. Christy had.

After Mr. and Mrs. Christy had had their store for twenty years, Mr. Christy got a chance to buy a bigger store downtown. When he bought it, he worked at the big store, and Mrs. Christy worked in the little one. The Christys' son has brain damage, so Mrs. Christy put all her earnings away to take care of him. Women had always worked in the family grocery stores.

The Depression was pretty bad in Butte. There was no government relief, and the unions didn't help their people either. The little stores in town gave credit, and everyone kept charging when they couldn't pay their bills. The stores had a hard time because they didn't make enough money to buy more groceries. Mr. and Mrs. Christy borrowed money to feed their customers. Some people are still grateful for this, and some just left and never did pay their bills. The Christys were never hungry or cold.

The Joshers Club made baskets at Christmas, and so did other organizations, so at Christmas everybody in town had a turkey. They did this for Thanksgiving sometimes too. The clubs also got donated gifts from stores and wrapped them to give to poor children. Everybody in town got a gift and a basket. Some people got jobs on government projects, but not everybody could.

The mines closed in 1929. Business gradually picked up through the thirties, and Butte started booming again as soon as the United States entered World War II.

Mrs. Christy knew two black families here in Butte. They were well-accepted.

Butte's business started to slow down in the early sixties. That was when the big chain stores came in. Lots of men lost their jobs when the Company switched to open pit mining, and that was probably what started Butte's deterioration. Butte used to have a packing plant, a broom factory, a macaroni factory, and other little firms, but they're all gone now. Kids started moving away because there were no opportunities.

There used to be lots of restaurants downtown. The ladies used to dress up and go shopping, and they'd always go to Gamers on the way home. It was a high class ice cream parlor. The restaurants had waiters instead of waitresses. Some of them had private back rooms. The Finlen used to have a beautiful dining room.

There used to be a restaurant in Meaderville called Teddy's. They served huge, delicious meals for very little money. Teddy didn't make any money on the food. His profits came from the illegal gambling that went on in the back. When Meaderville was torn down, the restaurant moved. It's now called Lydia's. Lydia was Teddy's old cook.

Meaderville just had a dirt street about five blocks long. Mostly Italians lived there. There was a big mine just as you went into Meaderville. It was the show mine. It was kept nice so when people wanted to visit a mine, they got to see that one. Nearly everyone in Meaderville made their own wine. Some people took the wine and ran it through a still and made grapple, which was brandy. The first liquor Mrs. Christy had was grapple. Some people sold it.

There were a lot of bootleggers in Butte.

Mrs. Christy visited a mine once. It was really hot where the men were

working. When she was there they were still using candles. Mules used to pull the ore cars. The mules would live their whole lives underground.

Tape #2
Side 1

They would tie the mules all up so they couldn't kick and then put them on the cage and take them down.

Whenever anything either bad or good happened in town all the mine whistles would blow. Every mine had a big whistle. Mrs. Christy remembers the Speculator disaster, which happened when she was about twelve. Accidents weren't uncommon. Many of the men had silicosis.

People started moving down onto the Flat so they could have more room.

When Mrs. Christy was young there were no trees on the mountains to the east. The smelters had killed them all. The trees there now have grown up since then.

Where the golf course is now there used to be a lake called Lake Avoca. People used to go out there on Sunday and row around on the lake.

People used to keep the body at home when people died. Then all the friends would come and bring food. If they were Irish, they also brought lots of liquor. The men would all be in the front room and the women would be in the kitchen. The house would just be packed. The men would have a rip roaring time. One time one of the Christys' friends died, and at his wake the men propped him up and kept giving him drinks. The man from the mortuary told them later that he had an awful time getting him cleaned up again. The men had wanted to include him in the party. All the wakes weren't like that, but people always came, and they sat up all night with the body. Funerals were large.

When Mrs. Christy was little, her family had a house on Harrison Avenue, and there was a saloon up the street. Funeral processions would go by, and then she could watch the men beat their horses and race back and go into the saloon.

The Slavs and Syrians would have a band in front of their funeral processions. They all raced back to the saloons too.

Mr. and Mrs. Christy had a cabin on Georgetown Lake. They used to go there whenever they had a chance. During the summer, Mrs. Christy used to stay out there all the time. They couldn't go as often when Mrs. Christy started working.

A lot of women belong to card clubs. Mrs. Christy also belongs to PEO, a sort of sorority, and to the Republican Club.

Mr. and Mrs. Christy haven't done much travelling around the state. They had very little time off, and when they did, they went to their cabin. After they retired, they went to Hawaii, the Caribbean, and Alaska.

Tape #2
Side 2

Mrs. Christy's mother was a milliner. She made a wire frame and then covered it with cloth, and put plumes all around it. Women never bought factory-made hats then. Everyone used to always wear hats.

Mrs. Christy's grandfather was a finishing carpenter and a contractor. He

built lots of big buildings around Montana. He tried to build each house better than the one before.

Mrs. Christy's grandmother was a member of the Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints. These were the people who didn't want to follow Brigham Young to the West. She wanted to move back East so she could rejoin the church, and they finally did.

