

Montana History Interview

- 1) How long have you lived in Montana?
- 2) What did your parents do for a living?
- 3) Did you follow in your fathers footsteps?
- 4) Were you able to travel to cities outside of the Butte area? (was transporation easy)
- 5) Do you like the way Montana has progressed as a State?

This is an interview of Hollis E. Coon conducted by Barbara J Coon at the home of Hollis Coon on the 28 November at 7:00pm.

(Barb) "Hollis how long have you lived in Montana?"

(Hollis) "I was born in Butte, MT in 1925, and I have been here most of my life."

(Barb) "What did your parents do for a living?"

(Hollis) "My mother was a house-wife, and my father was a machinist, on the Union Pacific railroad, here in Butte." Before coming to Butte to work he worked for the railroad in Dillon. Prior to that he had been a long shore man in Portland Oregon. He also did some old fashioned cowboying in the Grasshopper and Centennial valleys adjacent to Dillon."

(Barb) "As far as work went did you follow in your fathers footsteps?"

(Hollis) "Because my father was a railroad man, and I had grown up around the railroad, I had hopes of working on the railroad some day. After I returned from World War II I did go the work at the round house in Butte. I worked as Stationary fireman and machinist helper, also several shifts as a machinist. I came back from college, my first summer vacation from college and had a temporary job with the railroad I discovered I was doing some of same things as I had been doing years before, so I found another job and my last shift on the railroad it turn out to be the last days the steam engines came to Butte, it was all diesel from then on."

"Of course I reminisce about the railroad some of the best days of my life I spent working for the railroad, I did have the opportunity to be on several shift with my father and that made it kind of a special deal. Being able to work with him and learn from him at the same time, I liked that!"

(Barb) "You were here during the Depression! What was Montana (Butte) like during these times?"

(Hollis) "I was not very old during the depression days, I do remember quiet a bit about the depression days, I remember when a kid got a new pair of bib-overalls he thought he was in heaven. An awful lot of people ate an awful lot of beans. My father worked part of depression two days a week, and three days a week he was not completely unemployed, which meant that we had some kind of income which most people in Butte did not have. We used to buy a few things and trade a few things with the people that got the commodities on the give away the government had going at that time, we had plenty of beans so we didn't buy beans we traded something else that could be bought with the money and ate beans too. Our friends were a little bit better off than they would have been otherwise and a few extra beans didn't hurt us."

A lot of strange things came along about that time, I remember when I was about six years old getting a new pair of shoes, Oxfords I think, they did not last me very long, it turned out that they were some type of compressed cardboard and not really leather at all.

I remember all the people who went to work on various government projects, WPA being one of them. They lived but that was about it. They had no extra money for anything.

My father had an old automobile that ran, converted into a truck by taking the back of the cab off and putting a big fancy long pick-up box on it. He would take about 16 people up into the Wise River country for a long week of fishing. Everybody ate fish like mad. Kind of like the bear getting filled up for the winter time."

"A few good things did happen even if it was the depression time. One was the building of the Silver Bow Homes that area of Butte was a bunch of old log cabins, small old building not a very presentable area of town. There were a lot of old shops along Arizona Street and Utah Street when torn down and replaced by Silver Bow Homes it improved that area of Butte considerable. Many businesses would no longer be in business after the depression but many relocated and were in a better location when the depression did end. As it was if they had stayed in that run down area of town they might have gone out of business just because of their location."

"Nice thing about depression days, was street cars were running it didn't cost a great deal of money to ride a street car and so the people that lived farther way from the center of town did have the opportunity to get there with out to much cost. If you lived with in two miles of town you probable walked anyway unless you were somebodys great grandmother or great grandfather at that time. First the street cars ran at night and so to keep from walking down the rather dim lit streets. For lighting they had converted the old arch light into a light bulb type thing, one on this corner and one on that corner, they didn't give very much light compared to the light we have today. Just enough so you did have to worry about stumbling down the street. I don't think you had to worry very much about the other citizens as you walked down the street.

Butte has been a pretty good place that way."

(Barb) "Were you able to travel to outside cities as you were growing up, was transportation easy?"

(Hollis) "I was one of the few young people that was able to do some traveling. The railroad business again. My father worked with the railroad and consequently he did get free railroad passes. One or two times a year he could put in a request to obtain passes from foreign railroads, which would be from RR other than the one he worked for, and I traveled by rail as far east as Montreal, Canada stopping in Chicago to visit relatives who were former Butte people. Having gone to California from Butte one time going to CA and up the west coast of Seattle and back to Butte. As the country was coming out of the depression and I was able to travel to various places it was kind of nice.

Of course we went to place that there were people to stay with otherwise we didn't go there even if it didn't cost us anything to go there. I did have an opportunity to go to quiet a number of places. Automobiles were not the big thing for travel a few people were adventurous and went off in there cars here and there but just to get from say here to Dillon you would have to take three spare tires to make the trip. Toward the end of the depression the highways were getting better."

"I remember when they put the first concrete highway between Butte and Anaconda. Two narrow strips of concrete. Also when they put the first strip of concrete from Northern Pacific Depot on Front street over to Montana street there were two little narrow strips of concrete and the sides which were plenty wide enough for parking another vehicle were just dirt so if you crossed the street you got in mud and you got on cement and then you were back in the mud again.

Things are different now with black top from side to side; Then on Front street at the Northern Pacific Depot were cobblestone up to Arizona st but in front of the east end of the depot where Utah St comes into Front Street. There was a large fountain on the south side of the street, so the horses that were going to be pulling the wagons of goods up the hill could get a drink of water before they started their long journey and work-out. It was one of the more fascinating fountains I had seen around any place. Progress came along and as a place for the horse to drink disappeared another landmark disappeared."

(Barb) "Do you like the way Montana has progressed as a State?"

(Hollis) "I would have to say basically "Yes" about that there are some things I just mentioned about this. The horses watering trough which could have stayed there forever and been something worth looking at. Oh yes, it would slow traffic when you want two lanes of traffic turning off of Utah ave going east on Front St down to one lane, but it would be nice to see."

"Progress otherwise some business coming and some going and consolidation. Most of the consolidation stuff I can't say I like because when we consolidate these things it doesn't employ as many people. Political things have not changed all that much. There is always something we have to complain about and wish they were doing it differently. Of course I never ran for a Political office to try and do it differently anyway. Montana changes I would say are mostly beneficial. Interstate highways, with people getting out there and wanting to travel at higher rates of speed we need more space for them to go."

"Yes, the progress in Mt has been pretty good I think. It would be nice to have something like the smelter in Anaconda still running, having the under ground mines working full blast then we would have to have some place to ship the raw products.

In the long run I guess we are lucky to have a small operation in the mine going on here now, it does keep a few people busy and does help the economy and the community."