

Biographical Sketch

James Andrew Curtin (1910 -)

James Curtin is one of fifteen children, born across the country from New York to Butte. His parents were married in Waterford County, Ireland and immigrated to the United States in 1898. His father worked in the mines and later ran a saloon when he became too crippled to continue working underground.

Curtin began working in the mines when he was sixteen. He did every kind of job, but was mainly employed in the cages, hoisting rock and men. During the Depression he worked for both the F.E.R.A. and the W.P.A. He joined the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers in 1934 when it was reorganized in Butte and was an active union man for the rest of his mining career. In 1953 he became an organizer for Mine Mill, and worked to convince miners to stick with Mine Mill rather than go with the Steelworkers. He was made administrator of the Engineers when they decided to split from Mine Mill and affiliate with the Operating Engineers.

After the 1954 strike he was not rehired and could not get a job on the hill. He finally found work as an engineer for the school district, and ironically, became a member of Operating Engineers. He has no love for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company.

In 1930 he married Mary Troha, who died two years ago. They had five children.

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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Interviewee: Curtin James Andrew
 Last First Middle
Date of Interview: April 8, 1980
Place: Butte
Interviewer: Mary Murphy

Context of the Interview: Mr. Curtin is a big, strong man with a bristly white crewcut, you would never guess he is seventy. He greeted me with a firm handshake and a couple of folders of papers, photos and cartoons he had kept about people he knew, incidents in Mine Mill, his own history. He also showed me several pictures of Butte he had on his walls. We talked for about two hours, but after an hour of tape he said it was enough. He is outspokenly anti-Company and punctuates his speech with dramatic gestures and faces.

Tape #1
Side #1

Father and mother came to Butte in 1898. They were from County Waterford, Ireland. They were 17 & 18 years old, were married in Ireland. Father worked at the Mountain Con for a long time before they had dries, would walk home and the clothes would freeze on him. Mr. Curtin can still smell the mine-smell of the socks drying on the wood stove. Father got pretty-well crippled and Johnny Harrington who ran Butte Brewery set him up in a saloon, around 1915. He died in 1918.

Mother's brother was secretary of the Wobblies. Was in the Anaconda Road shooting. Was foreman of the Mullen mine in Idaho, then worked in Big Pine, California. Somehow punctured his lung, was brought back to Butte. His was the last home wake they had. Family supported his politics. Mr. Curtin admired him. Died in 1927, when Mr. Curtin was 17. He had started working in the mines the year before.

At the wake: the body was in the front room. People all gathered there, brought food, cigarettes and whiskey. "There was quite a bit to drink. It got to be quite a party before the night was over." Usually waked them for three nights. Very tough on the family. Went from the house to the church, then to the cemetery. After the funeral would take off in their buggies and head for the Five Mile or the Nine Mile. Once one of the buggies fell over and he caught his foot in the wheel, wrecked his teeth. "A lot of the times horse would have to go home by itself." uncle

None of the rest of his family were Wobblies. But he/had a lot of influence on him. "I firmly believed in him, still do." When he was a kid would go down to the I.W.W. Hall with his uncle. Once was on the street with some cigarettes, "snipes" and asked a stranger for a match. It was his uncle and he got a wallop. He never went bumming matches again.

When first started working, the foremen and shift bosses were good. Would put the kids someplace where they wouldn't get hurt, until they had some education. "They were good...they showed a little humanness ...everything that was ever gotten from the Company had to be forced from them. It was never given to them on a platter, you can bet on that." There were stooges at a great many union meetings. Someone sitting behind them, coaching them what to say. There to disrupt the meeting. A bunch of phonies, you could tell them a mile away. The company was too smart to threaten people directly. Speaking softly but carried a big stick.

"If they didn't want somebody working for them the word would go around from one mine to the other, 'Don't hire him.' No body could prove anything, you come up to the window and look for a job, 'there's nothing here for you,' but they'd hire you in front and back. There was just no job for you."

The Company managed to have people elected who were sympathetic to the Company, but he would name no names. "It's still a tender issue."

Father wasn't a strong union man, "was too busy raising kids."

Mr. Curtin joined the union in 1934, when it was first organized.

In the twenties, "they had things their own way." The strike in 1934 went from the summer to September. Remembers once he was on picket duty on the Anaconda Rd., had two glasses of dandelion wine before and fell asleep. "Could have hauled all the scabs in the country in and I wouldn't have known." Would bring scabs in and quarter them in the barracks on E. Broadway.

Strike in 1946, a lot of homes were wrecked. He thinks it was caused by the company not by the men because miners are not basically mean. "It was not at the instigation of the miners because miners got a lot of feeling."

Company able to force a strike any time. When the price of metal drops no reason in the world couldn't call a strike. Just refuse the conditions the miners demanded, and say go ahead, strike. Miners only got what they wanted when the price of metal rose and the Company had to get back into production for the sake of profit. "If it hadn't been for unions throughout the years, they'd never have the conditions they have now."

Reid Robinson was a good union man. Doesn't know what happened to him. People used to take a real interest in the union. In 1953 the Steelworkers tried to overthrow Mine Mill. Had a meeting at the Butte High, men went up to the union hall to reestablish Mine Mill. Every year after that it was a continual fight. All for nothing now. People loyal to Mine Mill because it was a branch of the old W.F.M. There was the cry that everybody was a Communist. "That was a weapon of the Company also." Doesn't know of any Butte kids that were Communists. Expulsion by the CIO started the whole "Communist" tirade. "It was the greatest weapon the CIO could have handed them."

Union was run democratically depending on how well union meetings were attended. If there was only a small group which managed to get control, the rank and file didn't know anything until after it was done. In 1936-37 the union was real strong. Had parades with 10,000 miners on Miner's Union Day, now you hardly hear a mention of Miner's Union Day.

He was an organizer for Mine Mill. When the engineers decided to go into Operating Engineers he was administrator for the Engineers. Decided to do that because of the Communist label again. Later when he couldn't get a job on the hill he worked for the school district and was a member of the Operating Engineers.

Joined the union in 1934, became organizer for the International in 1953-54. Then went back to work in the mines again, got sick in 1955, lost his pension because vested rights didn't go in till 1958. Sick from his thyroid, Organizer was a full-time job, trying to convince them to stay in Mine Mill. Thinks people were due for a change. Thought the Steelworkers were a more powerful union, over time were probably right. He didn't support Steel because of the way they had tried to take over between holidays. If they had done it out in the open, Steel would have won much earlier. Company formally stayed out of the struggle, but were always watching. Never has figured out whether the Company wanted Steel or Mine Mill. Thinks they were waiting for the weakest union.

Whenever the Miners were out on strike all the other unions in town were solidly behind them. Also got funds from all over the country.

The legislature was run by the Anaconda Comany and Montana Power. The union did try to sponsor good candidates, but could never tell how they would act once they got over there. "They'd better stay in politics, too, if they know what's good for them."

Tape #1
Side #2

People mostly accepted that what the Company wanted they were going to get, but they hoped it would go the other way. And they did gain fringe benefits.

Took a long time for the pit to get going, they hung on to the deep mines. Gradually encroached on the underground mines, lost the miners. "Eventually, I think they'll swallow the town."

He first started running a motor underground, then swamping. Done everything. Worked the cages mostly, hoisting the rock. Took some pretty bad cases out of the mine. In 1937 at the Badger on the 41 there were three men blasted. "We had to go in and just about pick them up with powder boxes....It was on a Sunday." Mines seldom worked 7 days. Sometimes would drill all week long for Sunday rock, over the weekend just muck it up.

To learn the cages usually sent you along with some experienced men, called you a pimp, "pimping on the cages." Had the main hoist and then the service cage was called the chippy cage. Didn't take long to get the men up if they behaved, but if they didn't would just close gate and pick them up later. Could push the cage in the shaft. Main cage would start on the bottom, the chippy on top and meet in the middle. He would be man ringing the bells to signal the hoisting engineer. Never had any trouble getting a job, but whatever he started to do, they would ask him to work the cages.

Was blacklisted. Worked for the county at the youth center for a while, then got on with the scho l district as an engineer. 1955 was the last shift he put in the mine. After the 1954 strike they wouldn't hire him back. Didn't happen to too many. All the ones he knew ended up with pensions and he didn't.

The old miners would give you a hard time, by way of education, but they meant no harm, they took good care of you. Wasn't particularly scared working underground. Good men to work around, it was a pleasure to go to work as far as that was concerned. It was just some of the conditions you had to work under. Conditions weren't safe and the unions weren't strong enough to make them safe.

Contract mining. Had lead off men. Gave them favored drifts, paid them higher and then the rest of the men had to work up to them. "This was the contract system. It was a real killer." If the lead off men got too far ahead, they were short-taped too. (measuring how much rock they broke). Once in a while would have a special contract where they were guaranteed money.

During the war had a lot of soldier miners brought in. Also pretty sure they brought in a lot of wetbacks. "Work em, work em till things went haywire and then deport them."

Easy for the Company to juggle the paying on contract system. Some miners were real sharp, but some weren't. Union opposed the contract for a long time, but the miners wanted it because they could make a little more money.

Different ethnic groups got along fine in the mines. Years gone by was trouble.

Start at the Leonard or the Belmont, go in with your bucket and get a shot and a beer for a dime. Go from place to place, by the time you got home you felt pretty good. A good bunch of hard drinking men. Prosperous when they had

moonshine. When father died brought 90 gallons of whiskey up to the house from the cellar of the saloon. Feds came and broke it open, right in the basement. The smell was there for months.

Older sisters helped out when father died. She ^{mother} had no bed of roses. One son killed in Idaho on a freight train, another died of lockjaw. He had a twin who died a baby. There were 10 boys and five girls, he's the only boy living. Mother often said, "I don't get much satisfaction out of a doctor bill, but I don't get none out of an undertaker." Died in 1948 when 82. Father was only 52 when died. First came and settled in New York.

St. Mary's mostly Irish kids. Never thought much about doing anything other than work in the mines. Later years worked on the rope gang, iron work. Lowered motors on the rope gang.

If something didn't satisfy him at the mine he'd quit. Sometimes didn't get along with the shift boss, but usually quit over conditions. Sometimes ended up in a worse place. His family, five kids was first consideration. Wouldn't work where he thought it was unsafe. His wife often wouldn't let him go to work, thought something would happen. Sometimes people did get hurt on the job he would have been on. The Irish were a superstitious race anyway.

His wife was from East Butte, were married 48 years, 8 months. Met her at the Rosemont dance hall. Married in 1930. She never worked outside the home. Never thought of moving away from Butte. "I love Butte. They ^{can} take me out of Butte, but they couldn't take Butte out of me. I wouldn't trade Butte for no place in the world." "The people are the main resource of Butte." People stick together. That has changed in the past few years.

Remembers once came home from work and Mrs. Sullivan was visiting his mother. Her son had died several years earlier but she still carried a big bandana to cry into. When he came home both she and his mother were crying. He was going to say something to Mrs. Sullivan, but mother told him not to: "If we want a good cry we can have it." Sisters worked as secretaries or stenographers. Mother and wife always made up his lunch buckets.

During Depression worked for the FERA, the W.P.A. Lined Silver Bow Creek with rock. Worked on the Bean Bowl, the Leonard Bowl. Always the Bean Bowl to him since you didn't get paid, just salt pork and beans. On other relief jobs got \$52.80 a month, then got a job riding truck, \$77.00 a month. Only worked nine days then go fishing. Shipped in cattle from the Dust Bowl and gave them away. Working in the mines, two weeks on and two off got \$50. month. Got more on relief.

Name: Curtin James Andrew Joseph Sex: M Race: W
Last First Middle Maiden
 Present Address: 1046 Diamond St. Butte Silver Bow MT 59701
Street Town County State Zip Code
 Telephone: (406) 792-4451 Birthplace: Butte DOB: Feb 28, 1910

Years of School: _____ Church Membership: _____

Grandparents:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
Fa:						
Mo:						
Fa:						
Mo:						

Parents:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
: <u>Simon Curtin</u>	<u>1866</u>	<u>Ireland</u>		<u>miner, Saloonkeeper</u>		<u>1918</u>
: <u>Mary</u>	<u>1866</u>	<u>Ireland</u>				<u>1948</u>

siblings (in order of birth):

Name	Sex	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
<u>9 brothers</u>							
<u>5 sisters</u>							

Occupational History (List jobs in order):

Position	Company	Date of First Employment: Dates

Spouse:	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
<u>Mary Troha</u>	<u>March 10, 1914</u>	<u>Butte</u>			<u>1930</u>	<u>1978</u>

Children (in order of birth):	Name	Sex	DOB	Birthplace	Yrs of School	Occupation(s)	DOM	DOD
	<u>Lorraine</u>					<u>nun</u>		
	<u>Mary Jo</u>							
	<u>Betsy Lou</u>							
	<u>James</u>							
	<u>Richard</u>							

INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final typescript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at the University of Montana. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publications, or for other related purposes.

* * * * *

I, JAMES A CURTIN, have read the
(Interviewee. Please print)

above, and in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit the University of Montana the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to the University of Montana.

James Curtin
Interviewee (Signature)

4-8-80
Date

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

University of Montana
Missoula

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

I, Mary Murphy, in view of the historical
Interviewer (please print)
and scholarly value of the information contained in the
interview with James Curtin, knowingly
Interviewee (please print)
and voluntarily permit the University of Montana the full use
of this information, and hereby grant and assign to the
University of Montana all rights of every kind whatever pertaining
to this information, whether or not such rights are now known,
recognized or contemplated.

Mary Murphy
Interviewer (Signature)

4-8-80
Date