

11-12-2005  
Butte History  
Jim Harrington  
Submitted by: Marcus Simonson

Transcript of the interview between the party interviewed, Lawrence J McCarthy, and the interviewer, Marcus Simonson that took place on November , 2005.

Larry: "One of the things a lot of people don't know about Butte is that the Irish miners came to Butte from the Bera peninsula which is the southwest corner of Ireland. There's a peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean called the Bera peninsula, and on the tip of that peninsula is a place called Allahese. And at Allahese there are copper mines starting back in the early 1800's. And those copper miners could come to Butte and get a job because they need people that knew how to mine, and uh in those days the Irish had a tough time getting a job. There was lots of signs on the east coast that said Irish need not apply and in Butte, the mines were owned by Irishmen and the miners were Irish. The Irish were welcome in Butte so these miners would write back home and say to their cousin Mike and their uncle Cass that there was a job here for miners. My grandfather, Padde Sullivan was born in Allahese, and uh, his father worked in the Allahese mines, and uh, he got injured and he slept with my grandfather in a bed and my grandfather was just a young lad and he woke up in the morning and his father was dead with in the bed from injuries."

Marcus: "oh wow"

Larry: "Then, my grandfathers older brother, big Tim Sullivan had integrated to Eureka Utah, and he found a silver mine there, and he brought his younger brother with him, that worked in the mine with him, and the younger brother got killed and he sent a telegram back to Ireland back to Ireland, to his mother, and she opened the telegram in the post office and dropped dead, and left all these kids orphaned in Ireland. Big Tim Sullivan came back to Ireland and packed up all those kids, and took them all to Eureka Utah. And uh, the brothers worked in that mine with big Tim Sullivan. And then he died at an early age in his middle thirties I think and, so then all the brothers were dispersed to various mining camps all around, and my grandfather after he married my grandmother in Salt Lake City in 1805 came to Butte and worked in the mines in butte. He ultimately got miners con, which is silicosis, and uh, poor ventilation in the mines in Butte created a condition where many of the miners got miners con and my grandfather ultimately died of silicosis, from workin in the mines. And in the early days in Butte, Butte as an industrial center was one of the most dangerous places in the United States. They had such a large accident rate, and they had so much sickness coming from silicosis that most miners could work and live a very short time in the Butte mines. They had one of the largest accident rates in the industrial world at that time in butte. That grandfather I was telling you about was my mother father, maternal side. My other grandfather, father's side worked in the mines and so did my father and so did I. When I was going to the school of mines, I started in the School of mines in 1951 and uh at that time there was still quite a few guys going to school there who would go to school on the GI bill of

rights, because the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war just got over in 1945. So there's a lot of men there working their way through school and at that the anaconda copper mining company offered the students at the Montana school of mines an opportunity to work two shifts a week in the mines, Friday and Saturday nights. So when I was going to the school of mines, I worked in the mines Friday and Saturday night and then I bartended downtown at a bar called the U and I. It was a hangout for the students and also the nurses. There's a nursing group from St. James community which is now St. James. There was two nursing schools there at Butte at that time. Peg and I met at there because uh, she was a community nurse and there was about five or six (Peg laughing in background) girls in Peg's class that married Montana school of mines students. My mother's oldest sister was 18 months old. Her name was Sicillia. She was waiting with her mother for a trolley to take them out to the Columbia gardens, which was a garden people in Butte used to go out to all the time, and a shaft opened up right underneath her and that 18 month old girl went 150 feet down that shaft and she was pressed up against my grandmother's legs and the ground opened up and she went but my grandmother didn't, and uh, they went down and got her, and every bone in her body was broken. They brought her up but she didn't live very long, but as a result my grandmother had a uh, a pretty much a nervous breakdown and my grandfather decided to take her out of Butte, and uh, out of the scene of that accident and so they went to Seattle for awhile where he worked and uh my mother was born in Seattle as a result. They came back to Butte after that, and then they homesteaded in Sanders County, in 1910 when they opened up the Flathead Indian Reservation for settlement, up Racehorse Gulch across the river, the Flathead River from Perma in 1910. My grandfather, well they sold that place after a few years and went back to butte and my grandfather was an "Alderman" in Butte for many years, and uh, my mother had two sisters, Dorthy and Mary, and then a third another sister, Agatha, and agatha died of typhoid fever when she was twelve or thirteen years old. And so my grandfather, there wasn't any sanitary sewers in the neighborhood in which they lived so my grandfather became an alderman and he worked to get Santa Fe sewers put in that part of town which he succeeded in doing. He was interested in doing that because of what happened to agatha. I graduated from grade school, a Catholic school, St. Joeseph's grade school in Butte and then I graduated from Boys Central which was a Catholic high school in Butte. And then I also graduated from the Montana School of Mines in 1956 and in 1969 I was awarded a professional engineering degree in geophysical engineering from Montana school of mines. In the early days in Butte, there was a bunch of brothels in butte that were centered on what we called Mercury Street. And when I was a kid I had the largest newspaper route morning newspaper route in Butte, the Montana standard, and part of my route included those brothels, and those girls were very nice to me that worked in those places. When I was a kid there were several strikes in butte. And the strikes in Butte got awfully ugly. They uh, the company would occasionally bring in scabs to replaces the miners that were on strike and then there was also the occasion where some of the management people could be taken as if they were scabs even though they had the right to work since they were management and not members of the union. And so I can remember occasions when big crowds of men would go up and attack some guy's house and throw all of his furniture out of the second door window, second floor windows. Cause they were either scabs or they thought they were scabs, and I can remember hiding and peeking out watching these riots you know and going on with these strikes.

Marcus: How often did these strikes happen? All the time?

"No once a year. There were large periods of time in Butte when the miners were out of work for one reason or another in the early days. The price of copper would change so the price of copper would be down for some reason or another. There were long periods of time when they were out of work I can remember one story in my family, my grandfather Pat Sullivan who went to uh, back to Utah during one of these periods of time when they were out of work to look for a job and uh he wired back to my grandmother saying he needed money he couldn't find a job and needed money to get back home. And my grandmother was a very frugal person, her name was, her maiden name was Maine O'Neal, and she always put money aside no matter how much money they and so she had enough money to take care of her kids and she wrote back and said she couldn't send any money because the money she had, had to feed her children so he had to make his way back to butte the best way he knew without any help from her. Her father was named John O'Neal, and he was, he was born on the Bera peninsula. All of my people came from that peninsula. And uh, the McCarthy's, the Sullivan's, the O'Neal's, and the Lonny's all came from within ten miles of each other, all my people in my family. Anyways John O'Neal in those days was on the run from the English as were many Irishmen at that time, and he jumped a ship in Ireland that he thought was going to the united States and they caught him after a couple of days as a stowaway and they put him to work shoveling coal , and he shoveled coal in the furnaces all the way to Australia. And then when he got to Australia, he jumped another ship, they caught him after a couple of days and they put him to work shoveling coal and this time the ship was going to the United States, and so he shoveled coal all the way to the United States and then he, he went down to Lakeview Colorado which is a another mining camp with a lot of Irishmen from the Bera peninsula were there and he had a couple of brothers there and he ultimately homesteaded in Colorado in the early 1870's in eagle county over the pass from Lakeview Colorado where my grandmother Maine O'Neal was born. And anyway he was a tough guy

Marcus: It sure sounds like it!

"But my grandfather was working in a mine in Park City, Utah and my grandmother was working in a uh, boarding house in Park City where my grandfather stayed and they met there and got married in salt lake city in 1905, before they moved back to Butte.

Marcus: "Do you remember much what it was like growing up as kid?"

Larry: "Yeah, I went uh, I had a newspaper route so they had two newspapers in butte. One was the Montana standard, the morning paper, and the other was the Butte Daily Post, which was the afternoon paper. So I thought well I'll go down and see how it looks to get a job delivering the Daily post. So I went into this room and there must have been 200 kids in that room and they were fighting and wrestling with each other and trying to get up to where they could get a job and uh, I don't think I want this job. So I ended up delivering the paper for the Montana Standard they delivered papers in the middle of my

route and I would go up there and deliver my papers. And in those days the weather was a lot rougher than it is now even in Butte because I can remember there were many mornings when it would be thirty below and I would be delivering papers and it would go on for days.”

Marcus: “Would you be out on foot?”

Larry: “oh yeah. I delivered my papers on foot and uh I had an apartment house in the middle of my route, I’ll never forget it because it was the Triple Drag stead apartments, kind of a nice place and I would go in there and it was warm in there. And so I would deliver all my papers that I had to in that apartment but I would spend enough time in there so that I could get warm in between. But it was a lot colder in Butte then even than it is now and for longer periods of time for some reason. I never really understood that. But I can remember one morning, the coldest morning I ever experience in Butte was when I was going to the school of mines and it was 56 below and I went out to get in my car to go to school, and at 56 below, the oil in the bearings freezes and nothing will run, so I just went back in and went to bed. That was the coldest I experience in Butte, was 56 below while I was going to the school of mines

Marcus: How long would it stay real cold like that?

Larry: It wouldn’t stay 56 below for maybe that day. Lots of days it would be 30 below or more and stay that way for a week or more. That’s pretty cold. I learned how to walk asleep as I would go out of my house I would have to walk up to my route in the morning. I could relax and actually fall asleep walking up to get my papers.

Marcus: And you said you use to deliver papers up around Mercury St? Pretty much your main area was up around there?

Larry: No I was in the center of town, it was on the northern edge of my route. I had a big route, and that route I transferred to a cousin of mine Tommy Pomroy and he transferred it to his younger brother Jackie so that route was held in our family for a number of years. But it was the largest morning paper route in central Butte.

Marcus: Where were you guys staying at?

Larry: 1117 South Maryland. Maryland was a street that was embedded on Front Street which is right above the railroad tracks. And that’s where I lived at that time.

Marcus: I think that’s really close to where I am living at right now. 413 First Street. Right between California and Maryland.

Larry: Not very far away.

Marucs: Yeah.

Larry: Yeah our house was 1117 Maryland and Jackie Pomroy who lived in that same house I found later in later years. Many of the Irish in Butte have a connection to Bera, you'll notice that I have a sign out here, my place is called Bera West. 7,000 miles west of where all my people came from. But there was a documentary entitled From Bera to Butte put out here a few years ago, that told the history of that. Migration of Bera miners coming to Butte. They needed experienced hard rock miners and these guys had experience. My daughter Colleen is now assistant director of the state of Alaska for the bureau of land management for the oil and gas and minerals, so she has lots of experience in the oil and gas business, but she doesn't have much experience in the mining business. So she has to go to these Alaska mining association meetings, so she tells that her family, she doesn't have much experience, but her family has 200 years of experience in the mineral business.

Marcus: Goes back a couple years.

Larry: Yes it does.

Marcus: What do you remember doing for entertainment when you were growing up?

Larry: Well, we played a lot of games in our neighborhood. We played football and baseball, a lot of it while I was a kid, we had a gang of kids that were my age, that I ran around with at that time, and so we played a lot of football, played a lot of baseball. On Saturdays we went to the movie in Butte, and you didn't have to pay much if you brought a can of soup with you. I forget exactly what the difference was in the ticket price, but if you brought a can of vegetables it cost less to go than if you didn't, and I can remember we would go to the movie, the matinee a lot.

Marcus: How big was Butte when you were there? Like how many people do you know?

Larry: Well I don't know that I know for sure, I know that in the early days there was over 100,000 people in Butte. When I was growing up maybe 50,000 was as big as it was. And I think now 30,000.

Marcus: Yeah I think that's what it is now. Been losing quite a few people. When you were going to the school of mines how many students were enrolled?

Larry: About 300.

Marcus 300?

Larry: Yeah. The first class of coeds came up there while I was going to the school of mines, there was 7 girls that came up and started at the school of mines in that one year. Now there were girls that had gone to the school of mines before, but this was the first time there was a group of them that all had started at the same time. Another historical note was when I was going to the school of mines I was on the debate team and in 1954

the Montana School of Mines, for the first time ever my team won the Montana Intercollegiate Debate championship.

Marcus: Really?

Larry: Yeah against the University of Montana and Montana State which was, they had regular classes for debate. So yeah, but we won the state in fact. I have a trophy here, but I can't see it. I played football for Montana School of Mines. Our team was never that good, we lost many games, and we lost games for many years. The school of mines until Peter, Luke Peter's kid played for the school of mines, well he put on a terrific record, the school won many games and once the conference championships at that time once he got in there, and he amassed scoring records and passing records and he did a helluva job.

Marcus: Do you remember any specific really bad weather, any storms, did you guys ever get snowed in or anything like that?

Larry: Well, you'd occasionally get some pretty good storms, I can remember one time comin home and getting stuck on the snow on the railroad tracks and went out and pushed the car off the tracks, I thought, but I wasn't far enough off and the train come along and took the front end of the car with him. I don't remember ever being snowbound, really captured by a storm. Well, we had some storms where you would get two or 3 feet of snow all right, but we have that around here.

Marcus: Not too much recently. Do you remember the economy, what was the situation there, was it a strong economy, was it on the decline?

Larry: Well, it seems to me that there were a lot of people working while I was a kid in the mines, so the economy was pretty good during those times. Except during the time they had a strike. I started an investment securities house in Butte, one year. I had to pay the running expenses of this business and it was a year they had a strike and I went broke in Butte trying to get my way through that deal and I can remember we were broke and I got a call from a company that asked me to go to work for them out in California, they could get a big contract with Standard Oil of California, they could get me to work for them because I had worked for Standard Oil Company before so the people knew me. I was negotiating on the phone for income and expense accounts and my wife was saying take the job take the job, and I said the last thing after we settled everything else, and I said the last thing I need, would ya send me \$200 so I could get to California. I went out to California and did that job, and we had some field crews working, they did some consulting and property work in their offices which in a suburb of Bakersfield. Then I moved on from there, to which was supposed to be a 3 month contract and it ended up being 5 years. Then after Ohio we moved back to Montana. I been rich and poor, and you know what, I like rich better.

Marcus: If you could have your pick, you'd take the rich one, you can't blame a man for that. Let's see here. When you were going to the school of mines you said that you'd

take a couple shifts in the mine? What was that like, would you just go and be an apprentice for somebody or would they actually put you to work?

Larry: Oh yeah, they put me to work. The habit was that they would take a student from the school of mines and they would put him with an experienced miner and you go down the shaft in a man cage, and then you would go off on a place where your stope was and then you'd go down a ladder to work in the stope that you were mining. And you generally had an experienced miner that would take somebody by the hand and show them what to do. When I first went to work they put me to work on a grizzly, a grizzly is a bunch of parallel steel bars like railroad tracks, spaced a certain distance apart so that when the ore was going in between those, that size, if you had a big rock you'd have to grab a double jack and break it up.

Marcus: It was kind of a sorting device then?

Larry: Yeah. The first job I had, they put me on this grizzly where I had to break this rocks up and get it through that grizzly with a sledgehammer and I worked like hell to get it through, then I'd sit down for a minute and wait for a train with a rock again and they'd load it up and I'd start all over again. And I did that for a whole shift, and that was my first shift. But I worked in several stopes with miners, the most impressive memory I have, is that a Butte miner would protect a Butte kid, and they would say if they were baring down the roof they would say you stand back, the rocks would come down, and they were always looking out for you to make sure you didn't get hurt in the mines, cause they wanted you to go ahead and get an education, get through school, and so we don't want you to get hurt so, my impressive memories were that those Butte miners looked out for us kids, that's a great thing. I had lots of experiences in the mines, when you go into your stope, the previous crew's shift had blasted and had timbered up the opening that they had blasted out, so you go in there and you'd have to bar down all the rocks that were loose and down, and you'd have to drill a lot of holes in certain pattern so that the you could blast off the next section. And they put me with a guy that didn't know what the hell he was doing and I didn't know what I was doing, we drilled these holes and would get our steel stuck and it wouldn't go the whole distance you wanted it to go and so we put the powder in the short holes and packed it in as well as the holes that were the right length and packed it in and then ya take your fuse off that dynamite and you bring it out and you take those fuses and bring them together and wrap them together and then ya cut em and then you take the end that you cut off and you light it and then when you lit it you put it against this live fuses in order to get them going, well I can remember this one time I do it like this and 2 or 3 of those get started and none of the rest and I finally I run like hell and got out of there, before it got to the dynamite and blew us all up. I can remember I was down in the stope with a miner and he says you go up and get some timber for me, everyone of those pieces had a certain name you know, send me down so many of these and so many of that so I did that the timber would shoot down the side of the ladder that you would go down, I would send those boards down that landed at the end of the timbershoot. And then he said send down a case of dynamite so I got the case of dynamite and I got it over by the timbershoot and I wrapped it up with the rope and I was gonna lower it down and I picked up the case of dynamite it slipped out of the rope

and down the timbershoot it went and we had a bearage down there where we stopped these and that case of dynamite went down there and hit that bearage and I could hear that guy down there hollering at me, swearing and then coming up the ladder after me. One of the most unusual experiences I had in the mines I was working up at the Mountain Con, on the top grizzly and they bring the ore up in these ore shoots and they dump them in what they called Larry cars which was the cars on the surface that would take from the oreshoot over to the huge grizzly, a great big round building that had a lot of grizzlies, and they dumped that ore on that grizzly, and my job is to break up the rocks to go through the grizzlies. They'd bring up wet ore from down below, one level particularly had a lot of wet ore on it, and when it froze it was harder than hell to break with a sledgehammer, so I got tired one time and I pounded on this ice, so I went and got a bunch of powder on it, and I blew em out and there was windows all around this big round building, and I blew out every window in that building, and they fired me. And they put a new rule in there, that you couldn't use powder on the surface grizzlies after that. I put rocks all over Butte that night.

Marcus: You improved their safety regulations for them.

Larry: Yeah, we created a reason for a new rule.

Marcus: There you go.