

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Margaret Cunningham (1906-)

Mrs. Cunningham is a wonderful storyteller. She didn't seem eager to be interviewed because she wasn't sure she knew anything worthwhile, but she proved to have an extensive knowledge of Butte's history, and her memories were clear and colorful.

She was born in East Butte, a community that has since been swallowed up by the Berkeley Pit. She grew up in North Walkerville, where her family lived next door to the family of Lester Cunningham, who would later become her husband.

Although Mrs. Cunningham lived through many hard times, she does not consider her life to have been a difficult one. She remembers that the Depression was fun, and that making do with very little was not a hardship.

Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham are active members of the Butte Historical Society and several senior citizens' clubs. Their only child, Frank, lives just down the street from them.

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TAPE INDEX

Interviewee: Cunningham Margaret
 Last First Middle
Date of Interview: April 24, 1980
Place: Butte, Montana
Interviewer: Helen Bresler

Context of the interview: Mrs. Cunningham seemed reluctant to be interviewed. She has made some tape recordings herself to give to her family and friends, but she had not been interviewed before. As soon as she understood the kinds of things I wanted to talk about, she became quite enthusiastic, and she even tried to call one of her friends to set up an interview for me.

Mr. Cunningham was at home during the interview, but while we were talking he went outside and worked in the yard.

Mrs. Cunningham is a wonderful storyteller, and her memories of Butte are vivid and detailed.

Tape #1
Side 1

Mrs. Cunningham's father was in Alaska during the gold rush of 1898, and he came to Butte shortly after that, in about 1900. He was following an uncle of his who had come west from Pennsylvania after the Civil War. This uncle was supposed to be the man who had driven the first pick into the spot where the Alice Mine was dug. When her father left home, his mother told him that he could go if he'd just find his uncle Ed, because Uncle Ed would take care of him. Her father was just seventeen at the time. He kept just missing Uncle Ed wherever he went, so he had to keep following him around. Uncle Ed was a gambler. He moved from Alaska to British Columbia, and Washington. Her father worked in the coal mines there. He also lived in the Okanogan Valley. He always wanted to take his family back there to look at it because he thought it was such a beautiful place.

Her father worked in the mines in Pennsylvania from the time he was ten years old. These boys were called box boys or breaker boys. They'd crawl into spaces that were too small for the men to fit, and fill up boxes with coal and then drag it out of the mine.

When Mrs. Cunningham's father was fifteen, he got his coal miner's license, and he could be a full-fledged coal miner. When he came to Butte, he lived in a boarding house in Walkerville. That's where he met Mrs. Cunningham's mother, who worked as a cleaning lady and waitress in boarding houses. They met at the Palace boarding house.

Mrs. Cunningham's parents were married in 1905. When she was born in 1906, her family was living in East Butte. They lived next to a boarding house where a lot of Austrians lived. Most of the men were out of work because there was a panic on at the time. The men would talk to Mrs. Cunningham in Austrian, and she learned some phrases from them.

Her family moved to Walkerville in 1910. Her father worked at the Berkeley

Mine. He had to walk from North Walkerville to the Berkeley. He always worked on the east side of the hill. When he worked as a shift boss at the Bull Whacker Mine, which was by Columbia Gardens, his children would ride the streetcars out and visit him sometimes.

Mrs. Cunningham went to the Sherman School in Walkerville. Then she went to business school instead of high school.

Five thousand people used to live in Walkerville. There used to always be lots of people on the streets in Butte. Mrs. Cunningham remembers riding the streetcar out to the Flat with a friend whose landlady lived there. It took all day. They always had a picnic.

When Mrs. Cunningham got married, she moved from North Walkerville to Walkerville. She and her husband bought a house there. They moved in on the day the stock market crashed. They lost their new house, so moved back to North Walkerville. They lived in the same house they live in now. They had it moved down to the Flat in 1951. Many of their neighbors from Walkerville also moved their houses down.

North Walkerville was kind of a continuance of Walkerville. There used to be some towns even beyond them. Past Walkerville was a town called Butcher Town. It was named for the Butcher brothers. Beyond that was String Town, where French wood cutters lived. They built their houses all out in a string. They cut wood for the mines.

Mrs. Cunningham's family lived next door to Mr. Cunningham's when they moved to North Walkerville. Mrs. Cunningham was friends with his sisters, and he was her most regular boy friend, although she had others.

For entertainment the young people in Walkerville went to the show almost every night. Once a week or so they went into Butte to the Rialto or the Broadway. The Broadway had vaudeville, and the Empress Theater had a stock company which put on a new show almost every week. They also went skating and dancing. The business college had a dance at the Rosemont dance hall every month. There was also a beautiful dance hall at Columbia Gardens. There was music there almost every night, and they also had dance contests.

People always got all dressed up to go to town. The ladies always wore hats, and had special town clothes.

Butte used to have all kinds of stores uptown. Hennessy's used to run a sort of general store in Centerville. Walkerville also had lots of stores. There was a big store in Centerville on the corner of Main and Center Streets that had beautiful yard goods.

Butte had lots of fancy restaurants.

After Mrs. Cunningham got out of business college, she worked for a doctor, and then she worked at an auto wrecking place. One time the whole fleet of trucks belonging to Symon's Department Store froze and their blocks cracked. So the auto wrecking place bought them. The owner had Mrs. Cunningham buy some kind of powder which he poured into the truck radiators so they didn't leak, and then sold them like they were ok. Mr. Cunningham bought one of them, thinking he was getting a good deal.

There were all kinds of businesses in Walkerville, but there was never a cemetery or an undertaker.

Mrs. Cunningham remembers the Depression as being fun. During the summer about six families moved way out north of Walkerville and lived in tents. They played games, and had lots of fun. There was no work, but it didn't seem to worry the Cunninghams much. They made their living gold mining in Missoula Gulch. Mr. Cunningham and a friend made a rocker which they ran with sewer water.

They used to have a good sized nugget, which Mrs. Cunningham sold once to buy a radio tube and a pair of socks.

Tape #1

Side 2

Work in the mines started slacking off in 1932.

Mr. Cunningham did some work on WPA projects. He made \$96.00 per month working for them as a blacksmith. The government also gave out surplus food. Everybody got awful tired of beans and oatmeal and prunes.

When Mrs. Cunningham's father died in 1933, her mother went to work in the sewing room, which was a WPA project. The ladies made dresses and overalls and quilts for the people who were on relief.

A lot of men from Butte went to the war. One of Mrs. Cunningham's brothers was killed in Formosa.

The mines ran seven days a week during the war, and men were brought in from other states to work here.

Mr. Cunningham's job as a blacksmith wasn't as dangerous as some jobs, but all jobs on the Hill had some danger. One time he fell into an ore chute, and a friend of his held onto him and saved him. That was when Mr. Cunningham decided to get out of the mines. He liked his job as a blacksmith. The Cunninghams' son is also a blacksmith.

Mrs. Cunningham's father was born in England. His mother died when he was very small. His father came to America, and his grandmother took care of the children. His grandmother decided to move to Australia, and she was going to take the children, but his brother thought they belonged with their father, so he put them on a boat and sent them here.

Mrs. Cunningham belongs to the Golden Age Club. They make things to give to underprivileged children. She and Mr. Cunningham belong to the Upper Generation, a sort of social club. She also belongs to the Daughters of Isabella, a Catholic organization.

Mrs. Cunningham used to go to Columbia Gardens on childrens' day, and stay all day. The parents would come out in the afternoon, and they'd all have supper. People stayed on into the evening playing cards or just talking. There used to be a festival there toward the end of the season, and the children would do dances. There were harps and butterflies on the hill in flowers. The children could pick all the pansies they wanted in the pansy beds. There was a greenhouse and fish ponds. Big bands played at the dance pavilion there. The dances were always crowded. People came from all over.

Miners' Union Day competitions were held at Columbia Gardens. They lasted all day, and then there was a big dance that night. There was also a big parade and all the union men marched in it. They had to be in the parade or be fined.

When circuses came, they used to parade through town. Mrs. Cunningham always went to see the circus parades.

Tape #2

Side 1

Mrs. Cunningham and a friend once played hooky so she could go to the St. Patrick's Day parade.

There used to be an organization in Butte called the Anti-Papist Association. It might have caused some of the friction between the Irish and the English.

Mrs. Cunningham remembers always mingling with other ethnic groups. North Walkerville was mostly English Protestants, and Walkerville was a lot of Italians.

Mrs. Cunningham doesn't remember Butte's Chinatown. Mrs. Cunningham's mother was always leery of Chinamen because she had worked with a Chinese cook once. They were working for a Jewish family. They were having a dinner party one night, and they were serving lamb chops. They had only bought one chop for each guest, and two extra guests came so there were no chops for her mother or the Chinaman. He got so mad that he spit on them before he served them. Her mother was always leery of them afterwards because she said they'd do anything to get even.

There were Chinese laundries in Walkerville and down on Galena and Mercury.

Mrs. Cunningham participated in all kinds of ethnic festivals. She used to go to Mesopust.

Mrs. Cunningham thinks Butte people are friendlier than people anywhere else. She thinks San Francisco is a lot like Butte. Outsiders don't mix well in Butte any more.