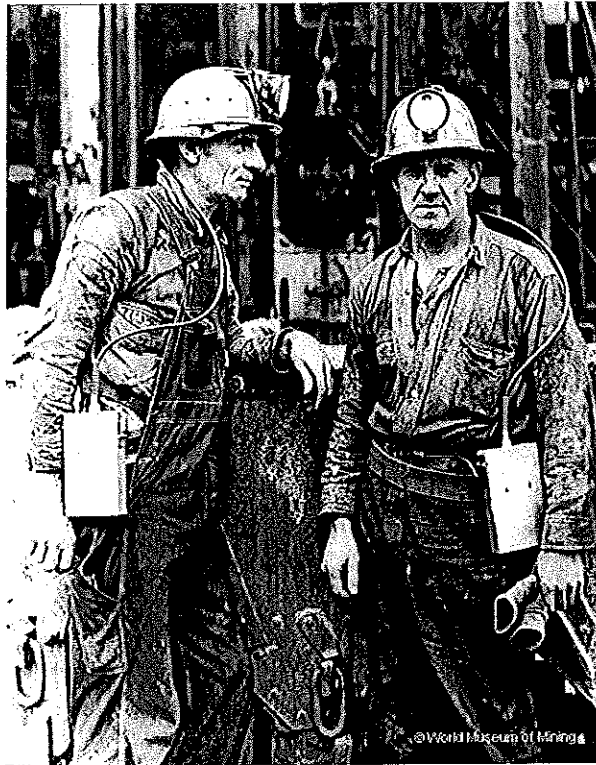


Andrew Acheson
MT History
4/10/05

Montana History – Oral History Assignment
Interview of Mary Claire and Jack Acheson Sr.
Conducted by Andrew Acheson (grandchild)
April 6th, 2005 at their residence in Butte



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Prepared Interview Questions

- 1.) Where and when were you born
- 2.) How did your parents come to Montana?
- 3.) What did your parents do for a living?
- 4.) Were you related to anyone who worked in the mines?
- 5.) What was it like having family members who worked in the mines?
- 6.) What was something your friends and yourself used to do for fun in Butte?
- 7.) What is your most vivid memory of the Columbia gardens?
- 8.) Who were some interesting characters in early Butte? What were they like?
- 9.) Can you think of any examples of the violence of early Butte spilling over into your family life?
- 10.) What were some good places to eat in early Butte?
- 11.) What kind of trips would you and your family go on?
- 12.) Did any of your family members contract any illnesses from working down in the mines?
- 13.) How bad was the pollution in Butte during the peak of the mining era?
- 14.) Was there any corruption in the offices of Butte you can remember?
- 15.) Do you remember anything that happened up in the red light district of early Butte?

Interview Transcription
Conducted April 6th, 2005

It should be noted that during the course of this interview of May Claire Atcheson, her husband Jack Atcheson Sr., my grandfather, came into the kitchen late in the interview and had some valuable comments to add about early Butte. Although my grandmother was the one being interviewed, I feel that his comments are very relevant and warrant inclusion in this transcript.

Interviewer (I): "Mary Claire, where and when were you born?"

Mary Claire Atcheson (MCA): "I was born in Butte, Montana on September 25th, 1935."

I: "At St. James Hospital?"

MCA: "No, I think I was born at the Murray Hospital"

I: "The Murray Hospital?"

MCA: "The Murray Hospital. I don't know if St. James was built then or not, but the Murray hospital was up kind of where the new jail is now."

I: "But it's not there anymore?"

MCA: "No, its not there anymore."

I: "Alright, how did your parents come to Montana?"

MCA: "My parents were both born in Montana. My mother's parents both came from Germany. My Mother's father came from Germany in the late 1800's. He lived in a boarding house and he worked here as a, well what they call a swamper in a lot of the saloons and he was almost penniless when he came here. I don't know how he got into this country, by a ship or what. I tried to look it up, Ellis Island has a list of passengers and I couldn't find his name. He left Germany because he didn't agree with the Kaiser who was the leader of Germany."

I: "What year was that around, World War One?"

MCA: "Well, it would have been before WWI, because WWI was in 1918, something like that, and this was in the 1800s that he came here. I know they had problems in Germany and I used to hear the family talking about this, but a lot of it I've forgotten, but I know he left Germany so he wouldn't have to be conscripted into the German army because he did agree with their policies. He was

born in, uh, my grandparents came from Mulehime on the Ruhr and Mulehime on the Rhine in Germany, and those are two separate rivers, and they knew each other before, because he came here and he worked very hard in menial jobs, and then he came back, he went back to see my grandmother. I'm foggy on this part because I know she came through Ellis Island, and I was able to look up her name in the register, in the ship's register."

I: "And those were your grandparents on your mother's side?"

MCA: "Yes on my mother's side, and his name was Peter Berenstein, and he had a bar here, called the Bismarck Saloon, because of Bismarck being German of course, and he built, uh, he must have worked very hard to save the money to build that. This was in the heyday of Butte, when things were really going strong. That bar was up where the Montana Standard is now and he had it for several years and at one time they were one of the better off families in Butte. They had one of the first cars in Butte and he built the Berenstien Apartments and a lot of people who lived here then would probably remember those."

I: "I think I've seen it, does it still say Berenstien on the building?"

MCA: "It did for a long time, Andrew, but it was on Montana St. and he built there big home next to it and they must have had a pretty good income for him to do that and over the years the apartments kept deteriorating in value and when the war broke out, the first world war, he lost the business because people went in there, in fact somebody went in there and threw a brick through the mirror in the back of the bar and wrote things about him being a dirty German and..."

I: "Because he was German?"

MCA: "Yes because he was German and even though he was opposed to everything they were doing and left Germany because of it, and when they had the bar, my mother and one of her sisters and her older brother were born above the bar, because they didn't have hospital deliveries then, and when, I'm getting ahead of myself, when my mother came over here she was about 18 years old. I have always thought to myself, to come over here and not know anyone, she had a lot of family in Germany who she missed a lot, and she cooked and prepared, uh cold lunches they always had those in the bars. They charged a nickel for a beer, and you think about how could they have made much money? But I guess they drank a lot of beer then. The miners were thirsty, and they would come to the bar after work and get a bucket of beer, and that would have been like 20 cents or something like that. My grandmother prepared all this food for free. You know how they say there's no such thing as a free lunch?"

I: "Right."

MCA: "Well there was then and they prepared all this food. My Grandmother was a fantastic cook and I'm sure that they would have, you know, you've got to remember that then, it wasn't things that you bought, you had to make it yourself, and in the meantime she had three babies and they lived above the bar and she worked and did all this preparation of food and everything."

I: "Lunch was free, all they had to do was buy beer?"

MCA: "Yeah, buy beer or buy liquor or whatever they bought, and I sure they set out things like cold lunch meat and bread, home-made bread and pickles and things like that to make sandwiches. She baked also, she baked things that they put out as well. I don't know, obviously groceries must have been a lot cheaper then."

I: "They must have been. What about on your father's side?"


MCA: "On my father's side, well, my father's family came from Ireland, and there same was Sullivan. In Ireland their name was O'Sullivan and most of them dropped the O when they came here, I don't know why. My father's name was Flurry, which sound like a girl's name, Flurry Francis Sullivan. He was the oldest of ten children and they lived up in Centerville, on the east flat, in this little tiny house that had no indoor plumbing. They had an outhouse in the back, they never got a bathroom until the oldest girl, my aunt Sis, went to work as a school teacher. They never had indoor plumbing till she went to work. And my grandfather, uh, I never met my grandfather or grandmother on that side, uh, he died a long time before I was born, like in 1928 and he was killed in the mines."

I: "How did that happen?"

MCA: "The lift, the, uh, elevator that would take them down in. The cable on it broke and it dropped down in."

I: "Was there anyone with him?"

MCA: "Yes, there were several people with him and they all died. All I have ever heard about both of them (grandparents) was, uh, everyone called them Ma and Pa Sullivan and there was always room for one more in their house, even though they were poor I'm sure, because he worked in the mines and they had ten kids and all those people, all my aunts and uncles on that side were wonderful, wonderful people. They were always good to all the kids. There were twelve of us grandchildren and they wee always good to us, and happy, and just good people. Your grandpa Jack Atcheson and I went to Ireland several years ago. We looked

up a lot of these relatives and I asked them how they came to be here and the one, uh, my grandfather, his name was Jim and he was supposed to come here, and his brother well, first of all, what they used to do, if someone came here (to Montana) they worked and saved and sent (money) home for someone else to come here and that's how they got so many Irish people here, and other nationalities as well. In Ireland, they lived in a place called Ardgroom and its still there and when we went back to visit, we visited with many of the relatives that still lived there and my grandfathers family and his brother lived in a place they called the duplex. Its not there anymore, but the basement of it is still there and one of the brothers came over here and, well, the oldest one was supposed to come over here, but there mother was ill, and she had ten or twelve kids and I believe she died in childbirth. My grandfather came here (Butte) and eventually a lot of them came here. A lot of them lived in Boston, whom I don't know. One that I met when we went back to Ardgroom, she was a nurse, and she had lived in Boston and had several brothers and when she retired she went back to this little tiny village in Ireland and the houses there were all pretty plain, but inside here house was absolutely beautiful because she had made a lot of money working in the United States and she had all this nice furniture sent over there and her cousin, who lived right down the street, had gone to England to work and she worked as a servant and here house was very plain and she was very old fashioned. The one who came here (to Butte) was not, of course, so anyway my grandmother came from, well, it was a place down the road from Ardgroom and evidently they did not know each other in Ireland. They met when they got here. Her name was Bridgett. When we went to Ireland, it is  such a beautiful country, and I was amazed at all the shades of green. Where they came from was all open, rolling hills and there were copper mines in Ireland that gave out and that's why they came here. Most of them left from town called Castleton deer, down near a place called the rings of Carey, down on the southeast coast of Ireland. They left from there on ships and lots of relatives came. One of them told me that here sister would write saying that when her husband worked in the mines here and she told me that when he would come home from working in the mines that he would be so tired that he couldn't even feed himself. He would lay on the couch or the bed and she would have to try and feed him because he would be to tired to do it."

I: "Did you have any other relatives who worked in the mines?"

MCA: "Um, my grandfather did, and so did all of his cousins and all the relatives like that."

I: "Do you know what they did in the mines?"

MCA: "Well, they were all hard rock miners. They would be the ones in there with a pick and shovel, and my grandfather was a big man, he was well over six

feet tall, so it must have been difficult to be down in those places. Now, your grandpa Jack, his dad and his brothers all worked in the mines. They were what they called contract miners and they would contract to produce so much per day. All the Atcheson brothers, every knew them that worked in the mines because they were all such hard workers. All of them ended up getting what they called Silicosis, which is miners con, they called it, and all of them ended up with lung problems from that.”

I: “Alright, well how about when you were growing up in Butte. What were some of the things you and your friends would do for fun?”

MCA: “Well, it was way different than it is now. They was no television, so we used to play a lot of softball. We also did a lot of bike riding. I lived up on the west side by the IC church, on west Woolman Street and we used to hike up to the big M, a lot, and there is a lot of trees up there now and there wasn’t then.”

I: “Probably because of the pollution.”

MCA: “Well, they cut down most of the trees to use in the mines, for timbering the mines, so there weren’t a lot of trees up there then. I went to IC school and we had friends that lived out in Brown’s gulch. They used to have the Orophino Ice Co. out in Brown’s gulch and sometimes if we would take a drive out there, they still made ice out there.”

I: “How did they make the ice?”

MCA: “Well, in the winter they would cut blocks of ice and they would pack it in straw and things to preserve it, so I don’t know exactly how they did it.”

I: “So it wasn’t made, it was preserved.”

MCA: “It was preserved. I suppose they could have made it then, but when I was in eighth grade my grandmother Berenstien, the one who worked in the bar, she and my aunt moved into a house on Caledonia and it still had an icebox. They didn’t have an electric refrigerator so the ice man would come and deliver ice two or three times a week. The guy would come with the big things that they hooked into the blocks of ice and the kids loved that. They would try to get a little chip of ice off the truck.”

I: “And that was like a coveted prize?”

MCA: “Yes it was, it was a coveted prize. And now you all want smoothies and frosties. It was a much simpler life. We used to play jacks and I would roller skate

a lot, my knees were always banged up from roller skating. We used to sleigh ride from the top of Western avenue down to where, uh, Montana Tech is now. There was always a lot of ice skating going on in the winter and I could never ice skate because my ankles were too weak. I tried but I could only roller skate.”

I: “And you lived up next to the IC church, the uh, Immaculate Conception?”

MCA: “Well I lived on Woolman Street and that was right behind the IC church. A big thing we used to do was, if you had a couple of pennies, we would go over to the neighborhood grocery store. There was a grocery store up on, oh, I think it was Alabama. I don’t remember the name of the street exactly, but we would go to Peddler grocery and they had penny candy there. The one thing I remember about the war (WW II) was that if the store got bubblegum in, the word would travel like wildfire around the neighborhood that Peddlers had bubblegum and sometimes you would make it up there in time to get a piece and sometimes you wouldn’t.”

I: “What kind of gum was it?”

MCA: “Fleer’s Double Bubble gum. It was wrapped in a little thing like taffy is, and inside there were little comics and jokes.”

I: “How long would you say the gum would last, once the kids had heard about it?”

MCA: “Oh, not long, a few hours maybe, but they rationed it to you. You could only buy one or two pieces.”

I: “How about the Columbia Gardens. What are some of your memories from there.”

MCA: “Oh, the Columbia gardens were an absolutely wonderful place to go. My family was always big on going to the Columbia Gardens, and of course Thursday was children’s day and you could ride out there for free. The rides were like five cents, the merry-go-round, the planes, and the roller coaster. They had a boardwalk where they had games. They had a little fish pond there where there were little plastic ducks with a number on the bottom and you would fish the ducks out of the water with a net, and the ducks had a number painted on the bottom of them and whatever number you got would correspond to a prize with the same number. It was a big deal to do, even though the prizes were probably worth half a cent or so. We used to love to go to the playground and there were some women who worked out there, they were like playground monitors and all the kids always thought they were so mean, and they were very strict. They would sit there and make sure everyone was behaving and it seems to me that even in the

summertime they would have on, like, a winter coat. Do you remember that Jack (talking to my grandpa)?

Jack Atcheson Sr. (JA): "Yeah."

I: "I think I remember seeing a show about the meanest, most notable of them. Do you remember her name?"

MCA: "I don't, I don't remember her. Do you Jack?"

JA: "Who, the woman in charge of the gardens?"

MCA: "No, the woman in charge of the playground. Those women were so crabby. We used to try to crack the bars"

I: "Cracking the bars on the cowboy swings?"

MCA: "Yes, you could swing the swings real high and crack the bars but we weren't supposed to do that and it was, of course, the main object."

I: "Was it loud when they would crack?"

MCA: "Well, yes it was and mostly the boys would do it. The girls would maybe try to but then we would chicken out because you really had to get up there to crack them, and it was really quite dangerous. Another thing about the gardens was that a lot of my relatives worked for the Anaconda Company, and my aunt Mame was the secretary for the man in charge of the Anaconda Co., and she used to tell us that when they gave the Columbia gardens to the city of Butte, they gave it to us in what they called perpetuity, meaning that they could never take them away, and of course they did anyway. But when the mining company got interested in it the paper was conveniently lost and, oh, that was a tragedy. When I was in high school we used to go to proms out there and they would open up the big pavilion and even after I was out of school there were a lot of bib bands that would play out there. When we would go out there for dances they would open up the rides and the best thing was to go on the roller coaster when you had on a prom dress. When my mother was young they had a zoo out at the gardens and children were aloud to pick flowers on childrens day."

At this point, I will skip to some highlights from later in the interview involving my grandfather Jack Atcheson Sr. as well.

Jack Atcheson (JA): "We used to sell papers, uh, they were two and a half cents a paper and we used to go into the Board of Trade bar and we had an exclusive in

there, so we would sell the papers for twenty five cents a paper. There used to be continual fights in there because it was a rough crowd with miners and cowboys and so forth, and they had two great big Finn Landers in there (bouncers) that used to wrestle at the Knights of Columbus. One of them was blonde and one had black hair. One of them, the blonde one, used to stay out on the street and take care of people coming in, you know, and the guy with the black curly hair would work inside the bar. If someone in the bar got too rowdy he would garb them, well first he would beat the hell out of them and then he would throw them up on his shoulders and run toward the big double swinging doors and he would yell something in Finn to the other guy outside, and he would stop anyone from coming in and he (the bouncer inside) would throw them right through both swinging doors and then if the guy had any sense left in him he (the bouncer outside) would be the hell out of him again. Then sometimes he would throw them onto the cars parked out there on the street. I remember one guy, he had a white shirt on and they beat him up and his shirt was just covered with blood and then when they threw him he landed on a hood ornament and it slid up in between his skin and his ribs and he was hung up on the ornament and unconscious and I remember his arm was sticking up in the air.”

I: “After he had already been beaten?”

JA: “Yeah, he was already beaten senseless, and then there was a place just down the street there, uh, that’s when I learned that gambling was not good, and then down the street there was a place called the C.O.D. tavern...”

MCA: “I remember that place.”

JA: “And that place, in the back, there was a steel gate and you couldn’t get in that way because the gate was always up, but in case of a fire you would run out that way. You could jump up on it and it would go down to an alley, it was a dead-end alley there. The people, whenever they would get in trouble there, they would just beat them senseless and throw them over that rail, down uh, they would drop about eight feet to the ground and I had seen them do that to dozens of people. None of them ever seemed to get hurt very bad, I guess they were too drunk or too beat up otherwise. I remember one time there was one guy in there and he had raped some Finn Landers daughter and evidently they couldn’t convict him. Well some cops came in, there was three or four of them and they kind of fanned out across the bar. They never said anything but that guy saw them come in and figured the police were there to get him, so he run out the back and down that ramp. My friend George and I run out the back to look and see where he was going and this guy ran down into the alley and to the left, you couldn’t go right because it was a dead end. Just about the time he ran out onto the street two Finn Landers who were brothers of this girl stepped out. The cops and them had worked this out, all the cops were doing was flushing this guy out and these guys were waiting for this guy and they beat him to a point, well, it was just like a pool of blood. They threw him down

and they cut him up with knives. They just had little knives they would hold in there hand where just the tip would stick out about a quarter of an inch, they would fight like this.” (makes a slapping motion with his hand)

I: “And they would just slap them with the knives?”

JA: “Yeah they would slap them with the knives and, not only that, but they were stomping him into the ground and I don’t know if he was dead or not but they hauled him away and I never heard any more about it.”

MCA: “See, that’s a lot different than the history I’ve been telling you. He had a lot different outlook on life. I led a pretty sheltered life, but his was quite a bit more free.”