

Maggie Cummings
November 29, 2005
Oral History Project

This is an interview of Mary Helen Cummings by Maggie Cummings on November 28, 2005 at 736 n. Montana Street at 7 pm.

Alright Mary, when did your family come to Butte?

They came from Ireland-Donegal- to work in the mines.

And they came straight to butte?

They were in Philadelphia first

What did they do in Philadelphia?

He came to butte and she worked as a maid. She didn't know much about the bedding and there was a nice quilt and she thought you put it on the bed to make it soft and she put the quilt on the bed to make it soft. And then they came to Butte. And he worked in the mines. There were 6 kids. 5 girls and one brother. He was the oldest. Charlotte was the baby.

What was your father's name?

Charles

And he was a hard rock miner?

Yes. And she cleaned houses for a little while. We lived on Virginia Street, it was a one-way street, in a small house. It had 4 rooms, 2 bedrooms a front room and a kitchen. And the bathroom. No bathtub or shower. We had to heat the water on the stove, they had a converter. We took baths in an aluminum bathtub. We had an old ringer-washer. What was nice about it was when you went out to play there were all kind of children out playing. And more fun than you'd ever need. Sleigh riding, ice skating jump rope hopscotch.

What church did you attend?

St. Patrick's for 5 years St. Patrick's Church and school. And then I changed in 6th grade over to St. Mary's.

And did you go to butte high?

No I went to girl's Central.

I heard that you had a prom date that is a figure in Butte. Can you tell me about that?

I went to prom with Kevin Shannon one year. But we had a central all girls no boys and then the boys had their own. And Girl's Central was on Montana, like a boarding school. We walked every morning to school, we didn't have a car. We walked everywhere. In fact we never had a phone either. We used the neighbors' phone.

Tell me about secondary school. I know you had nurses training.

I went to St. James sisterhood of charity nursing school. I started as a cadet nurse. The government paid for it. First year we got \$60 a month. Second year we got

\$90 a month. They bought our uniforms and paid our tuition. It was run by the sisters. They made us work hard. We had to make sure everything was nice and clean before we left. The patients had flowers. All the rooms were to be cleaned. We had to give the patients baths, and comb their hair and brush their teeth. We'd go to work at 7 in the morning, we'd work till 12, had classes from 1 till 3, go back to work at 4, 4 till 7, and we had study hall from 7 till 9. We had from 9 till 9:30 off and we had to be in bed by 10. We had one leave, till midnight a week and one overnight leave a month, to stay overnight. And our mothers had to come and sign permission.

And where did you stay one your one night a month?

At home.

When you worked at the hospital did you come in contact with a lot of people who were injured in the mines?

We took care of; we had the Miner's Ward. And they were the best ones to take care of. There were a lot of injuries; lost limbs, broken bones. They were really hurt. They were the best ones to take care of. The Miner's Union used to come down and give them candy every Thursday and they always made sure the nurses got some of the candy. They were so good to take care of and so easy to please. In fact they'd help us a lot of times. Sometime we would have to give them a bath, but with the miner's we would never get through with it. They would gather all the linens up. Empty the wash water, they were a big help to us.

They must have been accustomed to hard working.

Yea, the ones that was able to. We just liked to take care of the miners. They were the best patients.

And you married a miner?

Yes, I married an electrician who worked in the mines for 40 years.

Were you worried when he was down in the mines?

Yes, there were a lot of things that could happen.

He never got injured in the mines did he?

No

And that was John Cummings?

John Cummings.

And he was a Butte man too right?

Yes his mother and father came from County Cork Ireland. His father came to work in the mines. John was only 18 months old when he died. His sister was sick in the hospital and he used to go down and scrub the floors to pay for her bills.

How old was he then?

Thirteen. There were two brothers and his brother Ed was working at thirteen because his mother...that was their income. John went to work in the mines when he was young.

And he worked for how many years in the mine?

40

When did he retire?

1982

How were you affected by some of the unions in Butte?

We had a terrible time. When they'd have a strike John couldn't work so he'd have to go to Helena. In fact he went to Helena and worked at St. Peter's hospital as an electrician during the strike of 1960 and I was a nurse and went back to work. When they had a strike the men didn't go to work. And if they did go to work they were called scabs. And they would go to their homes and the people weren't safe.

You said you went back to work. What was your favorite part of working as a nurse?

Mostly the doctor's office.

Where was your favorite place to work?

In the hospital. I liked maternity,

Did you like the babies?

The mothers. I liked it better than the sick people.

It was more fun greeting life?

Yes.

The Columbia Gardens were a big part of life and happiness in butte.

Oh my goodness, we would wait to go out to the Columbia Gardens every Thursday we would take the trolley, and we would have a nickel to spend. And we would hold the nickel in our hands all day to see what we were going to get: candy or a ride on the hobby horse.

What was your favorite?

Candy

<Phone Ringing>

and we'd bring out lunch and eat our lunch and at one time they had pretty pansies.

Did you bring them home to your mother?

Mmmhmm. They had the cowboy swings and the slides and it was a real good time. Miner's Union used to have a picnic up there. They had a first aid class. A big day for all the miners and their families. The miners would all go up there. The Gardens were beautiful.

How upset were you when the Gardens were torn down?

Very upset

How old were you?

I don't know.

Did your kids really like it?

Oh yes.

How do you think the loss of the Gardens changed Butte?

Oh I think it was a big change in Butte. People didn't go out; there were a lot of people up there with their families. It was an outing; it was clean and nice up there. People still like to talk about it.

So, the phone just rang, do you keep in contact with the friends you make forty of fifty years ago?

Yes, there's one friend, Margaret Peoples, we talk for about 55 years every night.

No wonder I can never get a hold of you. Did you meet her in nurses training?

Yes, she was a nurse too. She was behind me.

Did you ever pull rank on her?

No. when we were working together we got to know each other.

With all the different nationalities in Butte what did you think was the strangest?

Strangest culture?

We never liked the English they were kind of selfish.

With your kids growing up around the mines did they ever get in trouble at the mines?

They never got in trouble but they would slide down the hills with the yellow mud on them and get in trouble with their mother.

Do you think that's why my dad had cancer?

(laughing) NO. No I don't think that.

I heard stories about kids stealing dynamite from the mines and getting hurt.

Did you ever hear anything about that?

Oh no, my kids wouldn't do that.

Of course they wouldn't.

I heard a story about my aunt Cathy bringing my uncle Mike to a picnic and him getting hit in the head with a horseshoe.

That was down here at one of the ball games.

So things were done as families and as a community?

Yes. Exactly.

Do you think if things hadn't changed it would be closer in Butte?

Yes I do. Before we had all the computers or they visited. And television came along and people sat around the TV instead of going visiting.

Did you have a television when you were growing up?

Yeah, we had one of the first ones.

Do you remember how much the fist television you bought was?

No, I can't remember. But we enjoyed it. We got it in 1950 or so.

Did you notice any gangs of kids in the neighborhood causing trouble?

Oh yes, there were lots of gangs of kids causing trouble. Especially on Halloween. There would be outhouses and they would push them over. The kids were full of mischief. And then on Virginia Street there was a house and there were a lot of men there they called the "Overall Gang" they were full of mischief, they drank.

Were they Miners?

Yes.

Do you remember some of the accidents, like fires, in the mines?

O yea, in fact, John's uncle got killed at the Mountain View. He went to save other men but died himself.

Did he save anyone?

I don't know. His name was Con O'Neil.

How has the area where you live now changed since you moved here?

Oh it's changed a lot. You hardly see children out playing and the neighbors aren't friendly like they were.

Can you tell me any stories about unfriendly neighbors?

No they just don't go visit. And they don't talk much. It's altogether different. They're all at home watching TV.

What did your husband do during the war years?

He was in the service, he was in the Navy.

Did you meet him when you were a nurse?

No, I met him when he got out of the Navy.

How old were you?

24.

And he was...

29. We got married in 1949.

When did you have your first children?

1949. no, 1950. We were married in 1949.

When she [Cathy] was growing up, what did you expect her to be doing on a Friday night?

I expected them to go out to the show or something.

Where there a lot of movie theaters in Butte?

Yeah, there was the Rialto; there were quite a few shows. We would go quite frequently.

What did you like to do before you got married and after you were done with school?

Ice skating, sleigh riding, I liked to go dancing.

Where would you go dancing?

We'd go out to the Gardens. There was a beautiful dance hall. And then the KC. There'd be dances there.

Was there life music?

Oh yes.

What kind of music?

Music from the '40's.

Did you do any of the fancy...?

We did the jitterbug. And the waltz.

Did you?? Could you do some now?

(laughing) no I'm too old now.

I doubt it.

But we used to go out to the dances like on Saturday nights at the American Legion, they would have dances there.

Every Saturday night?

Practically.

Were there a lot of people there?

There were a lot. Usually you didn't have a date. You just went you know, with a bunch of girls. The boys would go in groups and ask you to dance.

Did you get asked to dance a lot?

Mmmhmm. I was a good dancer.

Really? I didn't know that. Did everybody dance?

Yes. They all danced.

What dances besides the jitterbug?

Waltzes.

Was that something that you learned growing up?

Probably. Or just from being out.

So Butte had quite the active nightlife?

Yes.

Now what do you do on Saturday nights?

Stay home.

And go to church?

Yes I go to church and go out to dinner.

What church do you go to?

St. John's.

Phone rings

More phone calls. You're a popular lady. Well see people still get around and talk you're still talking to people.

Yea

So technology is helping you out would you say?

With the phone? Yes.

So overall your past years in butte how would you to sum it up, feel about it?

I had a nice life in butte.

Would you rather be anywhere else?

No, no. I've traveled quite a bit but the people here are friendly and I like Butte.

When did your family come to Butte?

Why?

Where did they come from?

Tell me about the part of town you were brought up in. How has it changed?

Tell me about your career.

Tell me about your husband's career.

What do you remember about:

World War 2

Gangs

Nationalities

Columbia Gardens.

Tell me about the fun things Butte had to offer you.

Mary Helen's Family

Came to Butte from Donegal by way of Philadelphia.

Four sisters one brother.

Four bedroom house

The old neighborhood.

Schooling

St. Pat's

St. Mary's

Girl's Central

Nursing School

Miners

In hospital

My Grandfather

Strikes

John Cummings

From County Cork Ireland

Father died young.

John went to work young

Career

Doctor's offices

Maternity

Gardens

Children's day on Thursday

Miner's Union Picnics

How its destruction damaged Butte

How a night life changes in 60 years

Dancing

Church