

**This is an interview with Mike Lewis at his home on October 17, 2006, by Tara Callaghan.**

**Tara:** When were you born?

**Mike:** I was born in December of 1942, here in Butte.

**Tara:** In what part of Butte did you grow up?

**Mike:** I grew up in McQueen and partly in the flats, and lived here in Butte up through the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, then we moved to Anaconda, and lived there for seven years, then moved back to Butte in 1957, and I graduated from Butte High, and went to the School of Mines for 4 years.

**Tara:** What did your parents do for a living?

**Mike:** My mother for the most part was a housewife until my brother and sister and I were grown. Then she went to work for the school system for a while in the kitchen, and my father was a salesman. He sold hardware and automotive goods most of his career.

**Tara:** And what do you remember- what was your favorite thing to do in Butte as a child? Growing up, what did you do for fun?

**Mike:** Probably, my favorite thing was on Kids Day, going to the Columbia Gardens. We could catch the bus up at the Rialto Theater, and that was a round trip. It included admissions to the Gardens for, like a quarter, on, I think it was Thursdays during the summer. They called it Kids Day, and we'd spend the whole day up at the Columbia Gardens, riding the rollercoaster, and the swings, and we really had a good time. We'd bring a lunch with us; my mom would make us a lunch, and I'd go up there with friends. It was really a great place for kids.

**Tara:** And so did you do that your whole childhood, I mean, the whole time you lived here? Was that kind of a staple kind of thing you did?

**Mike:** Uh, that was one of the things we did. My dad liked to go hunting and fishing, so we did a lot of that. When I was smaller, we did a lot of fishing and camping, and when I got a little older he took me hunting.

**Tara:** What took your family to Anaconda?

**Mike:** He went to work for Dee Motor Company as a parts manager in Anaconda, so we moved over there and I went to school there for about seven years.

**Tara:** Were you around when the Columbia Gardens closed?

**Mike:** No, we'd moved. When I left the School of Mines in 1966, it was still going; the Columbia Gardens was. And we moved to Seattle- I went to work for Boeing for 14 years; seven of it in Seattle and seven of it around the Midwest, on the minuteman program at all the minuteman sites – Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Minot, North Dakota; Great Falls, Montana; and back to Seattle, and to Washington, DC. I did a construction job there for Boeing on a computer center and an office tower and then back to Seattle. And then I went to work for the Montana Power in Colstrip in 1980, and worked there

building Colstrip's units three and four- two 750 megawatt coal fire power generating stations.

**Tara:** So you moved around a lot?

**Mike:** We moved around quite a bit. Then we moved to Rock Springs, Wyoming, and I did a start up engineering for a coal fire power plant, the Jim Bridger plant. I did a yard coal handling system for them, and then I started up two scrubbers for them. And then I moved to California; they hired me- the same company hired me to be the manager of a power plant in Northern California, and then I did that for two year, and came back. I had a chance to get back to Montana with MSE and I worked for them for 10 years 'til the current company where I work out of my home out of New Jersey- it's an engineering company. I do business development for them. We're doing a titanium program here that you'll hear about in the near term.

**Tara:** Did you come back to Butte to visit a lot? Were you parents here? Did you still have a lot of family here?

**Mike:** We did. We came back, usually once a year, Christmas time or during the summertime to visit my mother and father and my wife's mother and father and they have all passed away now. But it was a chance when we came back in '91 they were still alive; we had a chance to kinda help them out while they were in their older years.

**Tara:** Coming back and forth, did you notice a lot of when you came back for good. Did you notice a tone of change from when you were here?

**Mike:** There wasn't a lot of change. When I was growing up back and in the 40's and 50's here in Butte, it was an amazing town. It had a large population, uh, I don't know if you've ever been to New York City. I have, but Uptown Butte back in the late 40's and early 50's, it was like New York City, the streets uptown. They had, bakers had their goods out on the sidewalk, the meat market had their wears out on the sidewalk. I remember as a little kid, because almost everybody walked then; all the miners lived uptown and close to the mines where they could walk to work so there weren't very many cars. But I remember as a kid uptown trying to dodge all the people because there were so many people doing their shopping and everything in Uptown Butte. It was pretty amazing. It was a very vibrant city. It had multiple ethnicities, cultural, diversified population. It was a pretty neat place to live. A really fun place. They had professional baseball, they had horseracing here. Uh, Clark Park had a professional baseball league. My dad used to take me to baseball games there when I was a kid. It was a pretty neat town. Especially when everyone was working, all the miners. You could get a job here, all you had to do was go up to the Anaconda Company, to the hiring hall, and see a man by the name of Jimmy Carden. And he especially took care of the School of Mines kids, the Montana Tech kids; he always had a job for them. Him, and I remember Emmett Murphy at the open pit mine when that was going. He always had a job for the School of Mines kids. I always had a job anytime I had free time, summers or weekends. I could go to work anytime I wanted.

**Tara:** It was never a problem?

**Mike:** Never a problem.

**Tara:** For anyone to get a job?

**Mike:** Nope, nope.

**Tara:** That must have been nice.

**Mike:** It was nice, it was, and it paid good wages.

**Tara:** How old were you when you first got a job in the mines and what mines did you work in?

**Mike:** I started in the Mountain Conn mine when I was 17, and I worked on the 4800 level of the Mountain Conn mine. My first shift was with a man named Jocko Evans, who is now John Evans, the head of the Petroleum Department of Mt. Tech. He and I worked our first shift together, and have been friends ever since. Then I worked in the Stewart Mine, a couple other mines around Butte. I worked in the open pit a lot, summers and stuff. And then, I worked also at the Maiden Rock Mine, out at Maiden Rock, out between Divide and Melrose. It was a phosphate mine. I worked there one summer and some weekends during school.

**Tara:** Did you enjoy that experience? I mean, I'm sure it was hard work.

**Mike:** Very hard work, and, uh, somewhat dangerous. You had to be very careful and safety conscious. It, uh, made my mind up that an education was very important.

**Tara:** I can see that. Did you, um, ever have any accidents or were you around anyone who was injured, seriously injured, or, uh...?

**Mike:** I was in some near misses, was working the stope in the Maiden Rock Mine, and went in and the shift before had just blasted. I was in there by myself, when I shouldn't have been. But I was barred down, and was watering down and went in to change a lock bolt to start pulling on to the shoot and just walked out, back out of that stope, into the drift, and the whole thing came in. And just the wind, from when it came on, knocked me over. But no, other than minor injuries, I never saw any serious ones.

**Tara:** No deaths?

**Mike:** No. A good friend of mine was working, and I was working pulling ore when I was working at the Berkely Pit. I was hauling ore from the Kelley down to the crusher at the pit. And that day a good friend of mine they were drilling for Boeing development. My friend was up on top of the gallus frame with an air hose and somehow lost his balance and fell all the way to the bottom. His dad and brothers were working down at the bottom, and by the time he hit the bottom there were only little tiny bits of him. They didn't know what it was; they thought it was bits of rock or something.

**Tara:** Wow. How far down was that?

**Mike:** It was about 5000 feet.

**Tara:** Where you were working, did you work with a lot of old timers who had been working since the turn of the century?

**Mike:** I did, I did.

**Tara:** Did they have a lot of interesting stories to tell?

**Mike:** Yeah, they did. I don't remember too many of them. I do remember working with this old Mexican man. He knew very little English, and we were working in a stope again. I was pretty new, and I was helping him, and we were drilling out with a jack drill, and we were drilling out the morning round. I had almost finished drilling and we still had a few more holes to drill before we loaded the dynamite in, and, uh, his drill bit got dull and he wanted to change it out, and I kinda could see what he was doin, but he turned around to me and said "get me the beat knocker." And I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. I'm reaching around, grabbing everything I could, throwin it to him, handing it to him. "No, no, no, give me the beat knocker!" Finally I figured out he was talking about the bit-knocker to knock the bit off the steel. So, I mean, that was kind funny. But, uh...

**Tara:** Anyone that stands out in your head? That you worked with in the mines, anyone that you remember for any reason?

**Mike:** Uh, I worked in the Maiden Rock Mine with Benny Reynolds for a while. He was a world all-around cowboy, um, world champion cowboy.

**Tara:** Was this before or after?

**Mike:** It was after, after he'd been the world champion and uh, he was on the Price Is Right, or Name That Tune, one of them game shows. I remember we had a black and white TV. I remember every question they asked him was either "yep" or "nope". Pretty neat 'ol guy -- he's still around.

**Tara:** Oh really?

**Mike:** Yep.

**Tara:** Wow. Speaking of Mexicans, did you notice -- there was a lot of ethnic diversity -- did you notice, was there a lot of discrimination, as far as, when you were growing up? Did you notice it?

**Mike:** No, I didn't notice it. I guess there was some discrimination that went on. My recollection of Butte back then was the Irish lived on the north end of the town, up in Walkerville. The Germans lived out in the west side for the most part, uh, the Italians all lived down in Meaderville. My mother's family, were Finnish, of Finnish descent. They came here directly from the old country and they lived in Finn town.

**Tara:** When she was growing up, that's where they lived?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Tara:** Was she born here?

**Mike:** No, born in Finland.

**Tara:** Oh, and they came directly here?

**Mike:** Yeah. Now, my mother was born -- my grandmother and grandfather were born in Finland. My mother was born in Wyoming. When she was little, she came to Butte,

she could not speak English, she only spoke Finn, and, uh, went to school and learned English. But some of the books I've read indicated that there were some racial issues.

**Tara:** But you didn't notice it as much?

**Mike:** Not as a kid, I never noticed it at all.

**Tara:** How about the Chinese? Did you have much contact with, were there still quite a big Chinese presence here when you were growing up?

**Mike:** Pretty bit, yeah. A lot of the laundries and that were all run by the Chinese and several Chinese restaurants and stuff and yeah, and we used to go to the Pekin Noodle Parlor. I can remember that even as a little kid. That's been in business for a long time.

**Tara:** Has that been the same family that's owned that?

**Mike:** Yea, Danny Wong has owned that for a long time. I bet Danny is probably close to 90 years old now. He's a neat guy too.

**Tara:** He's quite a character. Do you think that Butte has changed – I mean obviously a lot of things have changed – do you think it's changed for the better, or for the worse? Or are you kinda indifferent to it?

**Mike:** I think the recent things that have happened recently – the new technology jobs, uh, that are coming to Butte, I think is a really good thing. I think they are good high paying jobs, they require folks with a good education, and I think anytime you have good education, things are going to be better. Not that they were bad back then, but I remember like my wife's grandfather when he worked in the mines, he had 7 daughters and 2 sons, and he made his living workin in the mines and on payday he would get a hardback book and a bucket of beer and that was his treat and that was his entertainment for the entire week. In those days you'd take your bucket to the local tavern and they'd fill it up with keg beer, and the smart ones used to grease their buckets so that it wouldn't get any foam. They'd get a little more beer that way.

**Tara:** Do you remember, I know there are a lot of bars in Butte now – but do you remember that, like, when you were in college – has alcohol always been big?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Tara:** A pretty big thing? Has it always been pretty prevalent?

**Mike:** Yeah, when I was working in the mines and going to college, when you'd come in, like to any of the bars in Finn Town, there were 5 or 6 bars just in Finn Town. There's only one left now, the Helsinkie.

**Tara:** And how big was Finn Town?

**Mike:** It was pretty good sized. It was from about Helsinkie bar all the way down Park Street down to where it turned, there used to be a tressel that took you down into Meaderville, and when you got to Meaderville you ran out of Finns and got into the Italians.

**Tara:** And was that pretty – say you had never been to Butte and you were, um, touring around, was that a pretty cut and dry line, to when you would leave one part and –

**Mike:** No, not really. No you couldn't really tell it. Um...

**Tara:** If you'd never been here before you wouldn't be able to tell?

**Mike:** No, you wouldn't be able to tell it at all. If you'd go into a Finn Town bar, most of the people in there spoke Finn. They couldn't speak English, or very little. So that's why they kinda congregated so they had the language, um, that way they could communicate and recreate. We'd come out of the mine, that was pretty much true, the mines never really closed. The bars never really closed. The afternoon shift, which would get off at 2 o'clock in the morning, you could find a bar you could go in and get a beer, a shot and a beer and whatever, a boilermaker, or a ditch.

**Tara:** Which was?

**Mike:** A ditch was – that term was basically started here in Butte. And what the miners would say, and how it caught on was, in the mines, underground, you had, what you called the railroad tracks went down for hauling ore out, on either side, or at least on one side, but sometimes on both sides of the track, they had what they called the piss ditch. That's where the Butte miners took a piss in the ditch, and there was always copper water and stuff in that ditch and so they'd come off shift, and if you brought your bucket with you after you got off shift, the first shot and beer was on the house. You just had to bring your bucket in and the first drink was on the house. But the miners would come in, and the ones who wanted whiskey and water would say "Gimme a little whiskey and piss ditch."

**Tara:** So that's where that started?

**Mike:** Came to be known as a ditch. Or "give me a little whiskey and ditch water." I don't know if they said piss or not, but,

**Tara:** But, something of that nature?

**Mike:** But it was called the piss ditch in the mines.

**Tara:** What kind of hours did you work? Were they all standard shifts?

**Mike:** All eight hour shifts. Yep, around the clock. Generally you worked 2 weeks day shift, then 2 weeks afternoon shift, then 2 weeks graveyard shift.

**Tara:** Oh, I didn't know. Did everyone do that, or if you'd been there a long long time, did you have more of a set schedule?

**Mike:** I think there were some jobs you could work straight day shift. But most of the work, all the mining, was done on a shift basis. If you wanted to work in the mines, you worked all three shifts.

**Tara:** And did you notice, um, the majority of the people that worked in the mines, that were actually doing the hard labor, were they well educated, at all, or was there kind of a mix?

**Mike:** There was generally a mix. Yeah, uh, but most of them were not highly educated. A lot of them were very mechanically knowledgeable, of engines, and motors, and how they worked, and electricity. They were good craftsmen. But for the most part---

**Tara:** Not a formal education?

**Mike:** A lot of them didn't have, couldn't speak English, and, uh, consequently, for them to communicate, even with the shift bosses, uh...

**Tara:** And did you notice, um, the education, did men come knowing that stuff, or was it all pretty much learned?

**Mike:** Pretty much learned, the language and stuff. When they'd get to Ellis Island and they heard about the mining going on---- when we were electrifying the world, literally, at the turn of the century. Um, they would talk to someone at Ellis Island and tell them they wanted to go to the "seven stacks of the never sweat". And what they would do is they'd put a nametag like, on their shirt, and it would show the "seven stack of the never sweat," and then people would direct them.

**Tara:** What was the significance of that name?

**Mike:** It was one of the mines here in Butte and they had like seven smoke stacks so, it was very unique, there was nothing else like it around the country. People could hear about it, and know about it, and they'd say, "Oh, yeah, that's out in Butte, MT." And they'd steer people in the right direction to get here, and they'd come here and find work, send money back to the old country, and get their families out as soon as they could afford it.

**Tara:** With your parents – is that what happened with them?

**Mike:** It happened with my grandparents. My dad – my grandfathers, both my grandfathers were dead before I was born. They were miners, and they came to this part of the country to mine.

**Tara:** Did they mine back in Finland also?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Tara:** So they came over – is that the reason they came?

**Mike:** Yeah, to find work. My dad's side of the family was Irish and they came over because of the blight that was going on in Ireland and my mother's parents came over, partly, just to find work, ya know, this fine country. You could do anything you wanted here. They came to this country, both of my grandfathers worked in the mines, and they ended up with lung diseases and died at pretty young ages.

**Tara:** And that happened quite a bit – people dying at younger ages?

**Mike:** Yep, yep.

**Tara:** Were there any women around any of this stuff in the mines? Were there any jobs for women? I mean, obviously not underground, but anywhere around?

**Mike:** The women that worked generally were in the boarding house. My aunt ran a boarding house, a Finnish boarding house, um. Neither of my grandmothers worked at all. My dad and his brother, their dad died when he was eleven and his brother was 13. So they supported their mother then.

**Tara:** Were they able to go to work that young?

**Mike:** Well they sold newspapers, and odd jobs, and whatever it took for them to have food.

**Tara:** And what was the earliest age that men could start working in the mines? Was there a set age, or did it depend on the person, or...

**Mike:** I think they started pretty young until they passed the laws.

**Tara:** The labor laws?

**Mike:** The labor laws, yeah. They would start at 13, 14 years old. I know they did in the coal mines back East, and I think that was what happened here in the copper mines to some extent.

**Tara:** What was the difference you noticed, you said, working in the phosphate mines from working in the copper mines? Was there a big difference in the way that you worked or what you did?

**Mike:** No really a big difference in the way you worked. But there was a difference in the type of rock you were mining. The copper was more of a hard rock, and the phosphate mine was more of a softer rock. And the major difference, the big difference, the work was about the same, but big difference between the phosphate mine and the copper mine was the temperature and the water. The copper mines were hot and wet and ventilation was very poor, but the phosphate mine – it was cool and dry, and the ventilation was very good.

**Tara:** So the working conditions were a little more pleasant?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Tara:** And how far down, how deep did you go in the phosphate mine?

**Mike:** They went straight in the side of a mountain, the mine I worked in, and it was just drift mine. You'd mine the stope, the drift off of that. And they had raises and some shafts, but that was not a deep mine – that's the reason it was cool.

**Tara:** And when you went to the School of Mines, what did you major in?

**Mike:** Geology, engineering, and I switched to petroleum engineering.

**Tara:** At that time, was it a lot more, did you not have as broad of a ...

**Mike:** I think there were 5 major degree programs at the time.

**Tara:** And they were all...

**Mike:** They were metallurgy, geology, mineral dressing, petroleum mining, that's about the five. I think they might have had engineering science. So like 6 or 7 degree

programs in my recollection when I went there. The first year I was there had a record enrollment of 600 students and 8 girls.