

BUTTE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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Interviewee: Duncan, Perdita
Date of Interview: March 18, 1980
Place: Butte
Interviewer: Mary Murphy

Context of Interview: Miss Duncan lives in her family's house on Park St. surrounded by photographs of her family and friends and pieces of black art. We sat in the living room, watched the snow fall for a while and talked for several hours. She was concerned that she didn't have much to offer me since she lived most of her life in New York, but her story is fascinating. She is one of the few black people left in Butte and is able to give a new perspective to the history of the city. After the tape had been shut off we talked some more and one of the last things she said was, "I learned very early that I was a colored girl growing up in a white community and that my name was Ferdita Duncan. After that nobody could crush me." A strong lady.

Tape # 1
Side # 1

Her mother had gone from Virginia to visit an aunt in Philadelphia who wanted her to marry a man of means whom she did not care for. She answered an ad for a woman who wanted a travelling companion. Her uncle conspired with her to get her trunk to the railroad station. The woman and her husband were travelling to Butte. She came here in 1905 when she was twenty. Grandmother had been quite willing for her daughter to go to Philadelphia, but had no idea she would end up as far west as Butte.

Her mother saw her father on the street and said to the woman to whom she was a travelling companion, "I'm going to marry that man." He was engaged to another woman, who was killed in the streetcar accident, father was injured. They met in 1906, by 1907 were married. Meanwhile the woman she worked for had gone on to San Francisco.

Mother waited tables at a restaurant on Broadway. Many big deals were discussed in her presence. Many things she did before she was married she just taught herself because she had been "brought up in the old-fashioned way of teaching the young lady all the graces." "But life was rough and tough out here." When Hennessey's mansion was opened she was hired to sit and stand by in case some of the ladies damaged their gowns, she would sew them up. Mr. Hennessey told the servants to put the shades up so that the people standing around could see in.

Was a club up in the mountains where the up-and-coming wealthy hung out. She was waiting table up there. Word came to call Cornelius Kelley back to Butte. She was the one to call him in from fishing. He was appointed president, never forgot her mother, always sent little gifts to her when he came back to Butte. Kelley always called upon her father who was a podiatrist to care for him. (originally a barber).

Father was born in India. Was brought here by a missionary after Montana was a state. After they were married he went back to school in Boston. Left three children home, had left money for the family, but mother never spent it, did other things.

In 1918, Miss Duncan, her brother and sister went to California. Youngest sister died there. Moved to this house in the twenties.

Father had taken them out into the street the night of the Armistice. He had been trying to impress upon them that this had been a bloody war to preserve democracy. He wanted them to remember it. The mine whistles blew, the boys were hawking extra newspapers. Recalled it the day she heard the second world war had begun. Remembered her father had said that the first world war would be the last war ever fought during her lifetime. Watched one of the companies train across from the building where she worked.

Was a polio epidemic before she was born that hit many of the children, her oldest brother got it. Her mother said she prayed so hard that the polio not go above his knee and it never did. Her mother was religious but not overly devout. Had a great deal of faith, brought them up to believe and depend in God. "But it never reached the point where life was miserable because mom was so devoutly religious." Had two churches, Methodist and Baptist, went to both. Mother had been brought up Presbyterian. When she came here she couldn't belong to the Presbyterian Church.

Black population here was about 2000. The ACM had their own private club. Black men worked there as waiters, ran the club; were valets to wealthy men. Women were housekeepers and maids. Con Kelley had a black nanny for his five daughters, remained in their employ till the youngest daughter came of age. Miss Duncan attended her wedding in New York, she was in her seventies, and their twenty-five anniversary. She had been the matron of honor at Miss Duncan's parents' wedding.

Whether the black men were allowed to or not they didn't work in the mines. Some worked at businesses uptown, janitors.

Discrimination: not being able to attend the white churches, not being able to eat in certain places. Was subtly done. "You were just kept out of certain places and by the time I was coming along, there were still just certain places I couldn't go and I just never bothered." She was only black in grade school. Couldn't discriminate against one person. All sat in alphabetical order. "I was a D and the Ds were pretty well close to the front." Graduated from the eighth grade at the Garfield School. Never cancelled school in the winter.

Black population was scattered throughout the city. Wasn't discrimination in the area you lived in but in the houses. Lot of little cabins in among the wealthy houses. (describes locations) Some really had nice homes which they bought. Mother told her there were some meetings held behind closed doors to keep them out of this house. Where her mother's faith came in. Told herself that was her house and no one else could buy it and they got it.

White people were his father's patients, kept them going. Only twenty podiatrists in Montana, her brother now is only one in quite a radius.

Tape # 1
Side # 2

Left Butte when she went to Oberlin College. Then went to N.Y. for a summer vacation, became camp counselor for Y.W.C.A., an all black camp. Actually never left home, for the people she stayed with in N.Y. were raised in Helena. Lived with them from 1935 to 1950. In 1950 got her own apartment with her sister. Lived there until 1972, on the river, a beautiful place.

Went to Oberlin because it was the first school to admit Negro women. All during grade school there was no difference made, but in High School with the socializing, dancing, was where she was cut off. Some with whom she had been very close growing up no longer had anything to do with her. Didn't understand it until her father told her she had to learn to live alone for the rest of her life. Didn't create a problem like it does for teenagers nowadays who

always want to be a part of the crowd. No one tries to develop the inner resources of teenagers today. "Nothing is too overwhelming that you can't overcome it." "I've never felt that life was passing me by. I've always felt that I know who I am, I know what I am, I know what I can make out of myself." Some teachers would never call on her in class. There was always her father to play cards and walk with; her mother to talk with.

There was a white boy who was going to take her to the junior prom but that type of socializing wasn't allowed. There were more Negroes in college, but looking back there was also more discrimination. They scattered you all around the dormitories, but they forced you to stay in your own group. If you went to a dance, whites just would not dance with you. But she wasn't really aware of it then. Brother was in New York University at the same time. It was a real struggle for her parents to keep them in school.

Didn't major in music. A black person wasn't going to be able to make it in the concert world, especially a woman. If you majored in piano you would have to settle for being an accompanist and most were men. Women are rare pianists today. Sociology was in its early days, psychology was trying to poke its head above the ground. She majored in English and sociology. Eventually became a social worker.

By September of the year she went to N.Y. she had a job with the Emergency Relief Agency, which later became a permanent city department. The only job she ever had.

She had studied music in Butte and played the piano. Got a job writing reviews for a newspaper, first as a favor to the editor, a friend of hers. She was only too happy to do it because it had been a struggle to get money to go to those concerts. Sat in the two bit seats in Carnegie Hall, in the dollar seats at the Met; had to take racing binoculars to see what was going on. Wrote for the N.Y. Amsterdam News. Got to go and see and hear everything and sit with all the major critics. Later made her the permanent critic. Other critics asked her to join the Critics Circle. Helpful to her, discussing the other artists, friends who played different instruments would help her out, taught her the basics of other instruments.

E.R.A. became Dept. of Social Services. Was set up to take care of people during the depression. Absorbed much of the work that had been done by private charitable foundations. Was only a fieldworker for a very short time, about 10 months. Then brought indoors to work for one of the administrators. She had a great deal of organizational ability, probably had a lot to do with having to do so much on her own growing up. Then moved into an opening in the law dept., stayed there until she retired. Took some courses at St. John's Law School. Some of the judges encouraged them to become lawyers, one in particular encouraged them to take the bar exam, before it was necessary to go to law school, since they had learned enough in experience.

She retired from the dept. in 1969, was working for the newspaper fulltime. Her mother was getting older, the owner of the paper was getting ready to sell, the editor for whom she worked was let go and she didn't get along as well with the new editor, so she decided to come home and look after her mother. Her father had died in 1958. Her mother died in 1978.

Went to Columbia Gardens all the time as children. Never went to Miners' Union Day. There were a lot of parades and always came out to the West Side because the wealthy people were not about to go uptown. At one celebration some men got some dynamite and blew themselves to kingdom come.

Tape # 2
Side # 1

Came home to visit every two to three years. In 1939 was a special \$99 round trip fare from N.Y. to San Francisco, first class. Sister came to N.Y. to look for work. Family she lived with in N.Y. was stricter than her father.

In Butte there were no boys to date, always had group parties. One person would have a car and take everyone to parties. Often had parties at her house, rolled up the rug, took out the Victrola. Had a curfew in Butte, were off the streets by nine o'clock. Taught you that the place to be was home.

In N.Y. man she stayed with screened the fellows that came to call. The man she was engaged to was killed during the second world war and never found anyone else she really loved, so never married. Sister went to work at the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church. She stayed with them until she got married. When her marriage broke up she went to Washington, where her youngest brother had then graduated from Howard U. He went to work for them in the medical school, she also went to work there.

Miss Duncan never got to the family home where her mother grew up. Did get to visit her mother's sister in Virginia. It was the first time she encountered outright discrimination, the moment you stepped on the train there was a car you were to sit in and nowhere else. Though she found in N.Y. that a friend you could depend on was a Southerner, they let you know right away they didn't like your group. Northerners would pretend. Never went to the South after the Civil Rights Movement so didn't have a chance to see if there were great differences. When she went to visit her aunt who lived on a big farm in Amelia, all the families were around and there was no reason to go anywhere where you were discriminated against. She noticed that what surrounded her aunt were members of the family that were white. Once conductor had her sit in the back of white coach. "I'd heard so many tales about the South, I did whatever's told cuz I was afraid I'd never end up getting back alive."

Never noticed the changes in Butte too much when came home for visits.

Discrimination in N.Y.: A social club she joined began in the thirties to try and get the white people on the main street in Harlem (125th) to hire blacks. Would go and talk to shop owners. One lady in N.Y. never worked, would dress herself beautifully, go to a restaurant and sit and sit. When they didn't serve her she would put her lawyer's card on the table and leave. The case would go to court and she would get \$500. When the war started she had to go to work. They were successful in getting some of the shopkeepers to hire blacks. Miss Duncan stopped when large groups of people started getting involved and becoming violent. Remembers when the term "over-react" was coined, when Harlem rioted over Martin Luther King's death. Stopped working with the group in the early fifties. In the forties there was no problem because they needed employees during the war. Lost interest when started working for the newspaper, started working for them in 1957-58.

Were in the concert hall from 8:00 to 10:30-11:00, then have to go home and write out all her notes. Had to empty her mind for the next concert. Got to bed at 2:00a.m. and up at 5:00. Had a weekly column, but nightly concerts. Once a month on Friday night came home and no one was to call or come by, sleep until she woke up, got up and didn't get dressed, just rested for the whole weekend. Never lost any time from work, had a very understanding director. Always reviewed classical music. That was what she grew up on, there were hardly any recordings of jazz. Her music teacher had a toy symphony orchestra, every student played an instrument. Her teacher had been taught by a student of Franz Liszt. Taught in the old Owsley Building.

Found it hard to adjust coming back to Butte to live. Thank god for PBS. Gets the N.Y. Times. Watches the opera. The nice thing is that when it's all over, all she has to do is go up the stairs, not come out and take the subway home. Go to bed with all that lovely music in your inner ear.

Tape # 2
Side # 2

There were still many people she had grown up with around when she came back. The younger people if they want to get ahead have to leave here because there are no jobs for them.

When she was growing up Montana had the best educational system of any state in the union. When she got out of high school she was ready for anything. The rest was all refinement. Had been taught how to study, how to think, where to go to find what she needed, how to write, how to spell. The teachers were very young. Had one French teacher that they liked as a teacher and a friend, used to go visit her and she would give them cookies and chocolate. All the teachers used to live around them and knew that they were out whooping it up, would call on them in class the next day.

Miss Duncan studied at the dining room table, her brother in a room upstairs, were kept separate when they were studying or practicing their music.

Had chores around the house, dusting, spring cleaning, cleaning the silver and china, helped change the beds. Boys did the heavy work. Mother told the girls never to lift anything heavier than their head, that was a man's work.

"I'm not into women's lib, I like for men to open doors for me and I like for them to tip their hats. I like them to be gracious." In high school the girls were taught the fundamentals of doing things around the house because sometimes men wouldn't be home. And the boys were taught the fundamentals of how to get a meal together: The woman might be in the hospital giving birth. Her mother taught her how to cook, not pie crusts and bread, though. All the children were born in the hospital. Mother used to take fruit to patients in the County Hospital.

Every Thursday children would go to pick pansies at Columbia Gardens. Had flowers in shape of Anaconda symbol, a harp, an urn. Everything was supervised, but not that closely. Watched a dance marathon in the Fox theatre, were held during the Depression.

"They didn't have to tear our Columbia Gardens. They call it progress, but that's destructive progress." "Two bits worth of metal...it boils down to the Company wasn't going to foot the bill to keep the place going." "Conglomerates, to my way of thinking, are nothing but another word for destruction. A conglomerate is a consumer of comestibles, and comestibles have to do with food and it's the little companies they gobble up."

Hasn't always been a one industry town. Was the Hanson Packing Co. Were 80,000 people here, not everyone was a miner. "They can blame the Company, if they want to, but they've got to blame themselves too." Talks about people's determination which saved Carnegie Hall from destruction. "Anytime a group gets together to decide to do something, they can do it. It was a half-hearted undertaking here to save the Gardens. They didn't fight hard enough."

"Noise can accomplish a lot. You can beat on a desk without breaking it. Some of those people behind the desk have the way of throwing words at you, not listening. And you want to get their attention you say, 'Now, you listen!' And that startles them and that momentary silence allows you to get your word in. And you really haven't become disorderly. Because politeness doesn't do it. Crashing symbols will... You've made them shut up for a second. That's when you get your mouth going...Have you really destroyed anything? No."