

Rex F. Henningsen

Rex F. Henningsen, attorney, interviewed in his office by Teresa Jordan December 31, 1986.

Notes taken from tape. Not a transcript except where noted.

Q: Copper is traditionally a war industry; it does well during war times. Butte certainly did well during WWII, but it seems to me that the real boom started a couple years after the war. The Greater Butte Project was announced in 1947, and that involved 20-some million dollars poured into Butte.

H. thinks there was more money than that involved. The Greater Butte Project was opened, the concentrator opened. Butte relied on the Anaconda Company. It was like a big mother to the city. That was part of our problem. Then there were nationally known labor problems here, with strikes every two to three years. The miners would have to save up to run through a strike. If the community needed things done, it would look to the Anaconda Company to do it. As far as outside investors starting business in Butte, they'd look at the labor problem, and the dependence on Anaconda, and they wouldn't come in. H thinks that when mining lost importance in Butte, Butte became more attractive, because we had a base to work from that wasn't based on all the ups and downs of the metal market. That's what is attracting people into our community now. You can plan; you don't have to worry that you will just get your business started and the bottom will drop out of everything around. If the bottom goes out of everything now, it will be general, and not just due to one industry.

Q: In 1951, a chrome company talked about building a plant here. At one point, it seemed it would go. It was about a \$3 million project. Do you know why that didn't come in?

H doesn't recall that particular event. His family came in 1889; two uncles started a little creamery here. H was born and raised here. His family was Danish, came to the United State, first in Denver and then in Superior, Nebraska. His father grew up in Superior. In 1889, the two oldest boys came out here and started a creamery in the bottom of Renshaw (sp?) Hall, which is where the Terminal Market is now. That finally grew into the Henningsen Creamery Company, Henningsen Produce Company. They had a plant on Wyoming Street. It was taken over by another

company in 1929, at the start of the depression, and at the time of the Clark mining interests selling out to the Anaconda Company.

Q: Did any of your family work for the Anaconda Co?

None in his immediate family. Some relatives by marriage did. H's parents pushed education somewhat. Most of his brothers and his sister went on to school. Brother Fred is a retired professor from the U of Montana, accounting and business; brother Bob was manager of Christie's Furniture, murdered in 1965; brother Ted had a truck line between here and Dillon; sister Virginia Link was with Christie Furniture. H's father came from a family with four boys and eight girls. They went all over -- New York, Portland.

Q: Getting back to the Anaconda Company, one thing that I have a hard time understanding is why it seemed to do well during particular periods of time. For instance, during the worldwide depression of the 1930's, the metal industries were depressed, but Anaconda paid off \$88 million worth of debt during those years.

H says that he doesn't know much about the financing of the Anaconda Company. He has been told that Anaconda's financial problems started when Chile took them over; the Montana operation wasn't making that much money. It was being supported by the Chilean operation.

Q: You were saying earlier that for a long time the community looked to the Anaconda Company whenever it needed anything. It seemed to me that that began to change at the end of the '50's. Anaconda had built the hospital during the '50's; at the end of the decade, they ended their involvement with the hospital; they sold their newspapers. The early part of that decade had seen such optimism. Anaconda had something like a \$300 million building program around the world, and about a third of that was spent in Montana. Then about '57 prices started falling and there was a recession. By the end of the decade, they sold the papers, got out of the hospital ... Was that cause-effect? Did you see, at that time, a change in the persona of Anaconda?

H says he doesn't know. When they sold to Atlantic Richfield, it looked like it would be a great thing, and it was for awhile, but it didn't last, either. H's feeling is that when Butte was finally shut down altogether, maybe they were at the bottom, but they were at a base where they could grow and expand, attract people. From that point on, things could get better. He's happy to see the mining start up under Montana Resources; but Butte will never again be so dependent and shaped by the copper industry that it affects the growth of the town at large. Now Butte has a good base to grow from.

[Talk about how Butte's progress has surprised the rest of the state.]

Q: I also wanted to talk with you about the decay of Uptown Butte. The last building in Uptown was 1964, 1965....

A lot of the buildings uptown were built before the turn of the Century. There was a lot of absentee landlordism, and a lot of people let the buildings go. Now a lot are locally owned; people are putting money back into them.

Q: There were attempts to diversify Butte before ...

The country wasn't ready for it, and we weren't either. You have to look at a broader picture than just Butte, Montana. Butte's weather gives it a bad reputation, and it's really not that bad.

Q: There is a tremendous draw to Butte for those born and raised here. I've talked to people who have moved away. Many are happy with where they live and with what they are doing -- but they still wish they were in Butte.

Butte is an easy place to live for some reason. It is easy to get around, no crowded super highways, traffic jams. H thinks we will grow more.

Q: The number of citizen projects in Butte is outstanding -- the World Museum of Mining, the Olympic Skating Rink, etc. Do you think that there is an unusual amount of civic involvement here?

H doesn't have anything to compare it with. But if Butte people want to get something done, they have an amazing esprit de corps, and they get behind things. Montana Tech is a great asset. Hopefully education in Montrana won't be cut.

That spirit comes from the great mixture of nationalities that we have here. Butte is so darn friendly, open and above board. Maybe Butte is still out in the developing West. Teepees didn't have locks on the doors.

When H was 14 years old, for two or three years the Henningsen produce Company had a contract with the Clark Mining Co to deliver turkeys at Christmas to every one of their employees. About 1925 or 26, H worked on the delivery truck. He delivered all over town 3300 turkeys, which was Clark's employment. H delivered turkeys to single miners in almost every rooming house in Butte. He'd wake up those who had been on night shift, pound on their door, say "Here's a turkey from Clark." I'd put it on the dresser, they'd say, "there's five bucks, take the five bucks for yourself." And that would be all over town, all these second floor and third floor rooming houses. Everybody got a turkey. Then you'd get some woman out on

the flat. The turkey averaged about 12 pounds, and she'd say, "That's turkey isn't big enough for my whole family," and H would say, "I'm sorry, lady, but they are all about the same. Have a nice Christmas." They would load the truck about 5:00 in the morning and then go all day long for about three days. The single miners usually would take their turkeys to restaurants, or give them to a friends.

H went away to school in 1931; gone until 1936. Went in the service in 1942, gone for another four years. He wasn't in Butte during the war years. He went to college and law school at the U of M.

Q: Had Butte changed during the war years?

Not really.

Tape 1, Side B

Q: What have been the factors in Butte's turnaround since the shutdown?

Butte people have a lot of guts and are willing to try most anything. And Butte got to a bottom that they could plan where they were going to go and not get knocked down by some quirk of the mining industry, whether it was labor or management or the copper market.

Talk about unions.

Butte has gone through a metamorphosis. And federal and state money has helped. Some very knowledgable people have helped Butte get its fair share. The Chief Exec [Don Peoples] has helped a lot. Consolidation was important.

Q: Why do you think there was so much resistance to consolidation?

People don't like change. You've got to sell change. It's easier to go along the way you are.

Anaconda had trouble in other areas of their operation besides just Chile or Butte. Butte was a minor part of the whole operation.

Q: If you look back with 20-20 vision, it was clear by the middle 70's that Anaconda was not going to play the role in the future in Butte it had in the past. But it seems like it took the total shutdown for it to sink in. That's the point where things started happening. Is that your sense?

Yes. The best thing that ever happened to the city of Butte was the complete shutdown, walk away from it. It left us right where we were, with a big hole in the ground. We had to go from there.

Q: Going back to something we just touched on earlier, Uptown Butte had terrible decay. At one point, there was talk of moving it entirely -- the Butte Forward Movement. But now it has turned around.

There was a Butte paper with a headline on it that said Anaconda says Butte Ought to Move. We'd be looking awfully silly if the powers that be would have bought that.

Q: Why has Butte been so much more successful in turning that around than other communities?

H doesn't know if they have been more successful; he doesn't know what to compare it to.

Talk about particular renovations uptown.

Q: What's in the future for Butte?

Continual steady growth.

Q: There are some black clouds -- certainly MHD is always questionable with Federal funding, and Tech is in trouble right now. ... Do you think that Butte can still rally around and get what it needs out of the legislature like it could even ten years ago?

If we want the right thing, if it's right for Butte, it's right for the rest of the state.

Talk about Tech. Information H just got from Tech: one of every ten graduates in petroleum engineering received their degree from Tech; one of every 12 geophysicists; one of every 14 mineral processing and mining engineers, one of every 25 geological engineers; one of every 26 environmental engineers.

Q: Butte has always seemed to have a commitment to education. You look at these immigrant families where the father worked in the mines and the kids became professionals.

"That's because Momma says you go to school; you are not going to go down one of these mines."

Q: Do you think that as we move away from the immigrant identity, as families are fourth and fifth generation rather than second and third, and as there is more general prosperity, that Butte is moving away from that commitment to education?

No. There are just a certain number who are going to go to school and a certain number who aren't. In H's days, there weren't any student loans. His mother borrowed \$75 to send him to first quarter of school in the depression days.

H worked in the summer, and had a job at school all except for one year of the five. He waited tables in a fraternity house for a year; proctor and assistant manager and manager of the dormitory for three years.

Q: What haven't we talked about that's important?

"Butte's been here for a long time and it will be for a long time. It's not going to be a ghost town just because it was a mining camp. We've got away from that; we are out of that picture. Everybody was going to have us a ghost town and a defunct mining camp. Now it's gone by; we got over that hurdle. We are over that, we are through with it. We've still got the mining here and it may be here for a long time, but if it isn't, we are still going to be here. We've got a lot of assets around here rather than just the mining, the copper in the ground. We are on an interstate crossroads. We do need better air transportation. If we had that, we'd grow even more than we are."

End of Interview.